



Bell Let's Talk Conversation Toolkit

Conversation Guide

Tools to start a one-on-one conversation
about mental health



Acknowledgments

Funded by Bell Let's Talk to provide tools and resources for Canadians to start safe conversations about mental health, the Bell Let's Talk Conversation Guide ("Tools to Start a One-on-One Conversation") and the Bell Let's Talk Facilitator Guide ("Tools to Start a Community Conversation") were created by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

CAMH

CAMH is Canada's largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital, as well as one of the world's leading research centres in the area of addiction and mental health. CAMH combines clinical care, research, education, policy development and health promotion to help transform the lives of people affected by mental health and addiction issues. For more information, visit www.camh.ca.

Disclaimer

Information in this publication is not to be used for diagnosis, treatment or referral services. Individuals should contact their personal physician and/or their local addiction or mental health agency for further information.

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Introduction

What is Bell Let's Talk?

The largest-ever corporate commitment to mental health in Canada, Bell Let's Talk is focused on four key action pillars: Anti-stigma, Care and Access, Research and Workplace Leadership. Since its launch in September 2010, Bell Let's Talk has partnered with more than 1,500 organizations providing mental health supports and services throughout Canada, including hospitals, universities, local community service providers and other care and research organizations. To learn more, please visit Bell.ca/LetsTalk.



To help you take action and create real change, the Bell Let's Talk Conversation Toolkit provides information and resources on how you can facilitate a conversation in your community, as well as guidelines on ways to have conversations with people you may care for and be concerned about.

The Bell Let's Talk Conversation Toolkit consists of two elements:

- The Bell Let's Talk Facilitator's Guide, including slides and handouts to help you lead a community conversation
- The Bell Let's Talk Conversation Guide (i.e., this guide) to help you have one-on-one discussions with people you care about

Our overall goal is to continue the conversation about mental health all year. Every day, we should feel comfortable talking about mental health.

Thank you for helping to create real change in mental health.

What is this guide all about?

This guide is designed to help people start conversations about mental health with people in their lives, such as friends, colleagues, neighbours or family members.

There are important reasons to start talking about mental health. For instance, mental health issues are among the most widespread health issues in the country, and there are implications for everyone. One in three Canadians will experience a mental illness at some point in their lives; however, many people are hesitant about talking to coworkers, friends or family members about mental health and seeking treatment. While you may not experience mental health challenges first-hand, it is likely that you know someone who has or will have a mental illness.

For anyone facing challenges with their mental health, stigma (i.e., negative attitudes and discrimination) is one of the biggest hurdles to overcome. In fact, it is the leading reason why two-thirds of people living with mental health issues do not seek help.

This guide will help you plan ways of engaging in conversations about mental health. The three key goals for this guide are to:

- Encourage Canadians to talk openly about mental health in their communities, workplaces, schools and homes
- Provide practical information (e.g., tools, tips and strategies) for starting conversations about mental health, promoting recovery and encouraging healthy communities
- Help Canadians understand and break down the stigma attached to mental health issues

Who uses this guide?

Anyone can have this conversation. However, doing so may be of particular interest to:

- People with lived experience of mental health issues
- Parents, other family members or friends of people with mental health issues
- Peer support workers
- CEGEP, college or university counsellors
- Faith leaders
- People trained in conflict resolution
- Addiction workers
- Anyone who is interested in promoting mental health

Core concepts of mental health

Mental health

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to their community (WHO, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation & University of Melbourne, 2004).

Three ideas are central to this definition of mental health: it is an integral part of health, it is more than the absence of illness and it is intimately connected with overall wellness.

Mental illness

Mental illnesses include a broad range of problems with different symptoms. However, they are generally characterized by some combination of changes in or disruptions of typical thoughts, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others (WHO, 2011). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) refers to mental illnesses as “disorders.”

Mental health continuum (dual continua of mental health)

Mental health is not the opposite of mental illness. Mental health means well-being rather than just living without an illness. You can have good mental health while living with a mental illness and poor mental health even though you do not have a mental illness.

Social determinants of mental health

Mental health challenges are largely influenced by the social, economic and physical environments in which people live (WHO & Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2014). These factors often affect whole communities, which puts groups of people at greater risk of poor mental health. Because they affect the mental and physical health statuses of groups of people, they are called “social determinants of health.” The social determinants of mental health include:

- Employment status
- Housing
- Food security
- Trauma (which may be intergenerational or cyclical due to the cycle of poverty)
- Poverty
- Education
- Access to health care
- Racism

Stigma

Although one in three Canadians will experience a mental illness at some point in their lives, many don't seek out the treatment or support they need because of fear of stigmatization.

Stigma includes both a negative attitude and the physical act of discrimination that results from the negative bias. Stigma means thinking less of a person because of their condition.

Stigma can make people feel unwanted and ashamed. It is often harder to deal with than the illness itself.

Stigmatization of mental illness may interact with other forms of stigma related to social identities, such as race, gender and sexuality. Stigma is especially difficult for people living with these conditions because it can create barriers to accessing necessary social and structural supports. This can result in further experiences of stigma (Jackson-Best & Edwards, 2018).

Addressing stigma

These are some ways to talk about mental illness, show your support and help those who are facing mental health challenges seek help:

- Be kind: Small acts of kindness make a big difference
- Educate yourself: Learn about and talk more about the signs of mental illness
- Language matters: Pay attention to the words you use about mental health and illness
- Listen and ask: Sometimes, it's best to just listen
- Talk about it: Start a dialogue and break the silence

Language use

We are all different, yet we all deserve to be treated with respect. Here are some suggested language choices for discussing mental health issues without being stigmatizing (Media Smarts, n.d.).

Respectful language	Disrespectful language
Person with schizophrenia	Schizophrenic
Person with bipolar disorder	Manic depressive
Person with a disability	Handicapped person

Empowering language	Disempowering language
Person with a mental illness	Mentally ill
Person experiencing mental illness	Victim / Sufferer
Person experiencing mental health symptoms	Crazy / Wacko / Lunatic

Do	Don't
Put the person first	Refer to people by their illness
Become informed about mental illnesses	Be judgmental
Speak up about stigma	Let jokes or misinformation go
Talk openly about mental illnesses	Treat mental illnesses as something to be embarrassed about

Terms to avoid
Challenged
Special
Normal versus not normal
Psycho, psychopath or demented

What does a mental health problem look like?

We all feel sad, worried, scared, irritated or suspicious at times. But these kinds of feelings may become a problem if they get in the way of our daily lives over a long period. These kinds of problems can affect anyone, regardless of their age, educational background, income level, gender or culture.

Mental health problems can affect our feelings, thoughts, physical well-being and actions. The signs may be visible or invisible. This is what you may observe in someone with a mental health problem:

Feeling

- Feeling sad or irritable for more than two weeks
- Having excessive worries, fears and anxieties
- Having extreme mood swings—from feeling really high to feeling really low
- Feeling apathetic or disinterested in things
- Feeling hopeless or desperate
- Feeling really angry

Thinking

- Having distorted or confused thoughts
- Having strange beliefs not based in reality (delusions) or hearing, seeing or smelling things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- Having difficulty remembering things and concentrating, which affects work or studies
- Making poor decisions
- Thinking their situation is hopeless, that they are worthless or that things will never get better

Doing

- Drinking or using other drugs excessively
- Seeming agitated and restless and appearing dishevelled
- Withdrawing from activities and friends
- Crying a lot
- Having many physical complaints, such as headaches or stomach aches with no clear cause
- Having difficulty sleeping
- Having significant changes in eating
- Having a hard time getting motivated for more than two weeks
- Talking about killing or harming oneself

Let's talk about mental health

Determining how best to start a conversation about mental health can be challenging. However, you don't need to be a mental health expert to help someone in distress. Start talking! Having a conversation is the best way to start breaking down barriers.

Here are some suggestions on how to reach out and support someone you are concerned about.

Reach out

Ask how the person is doing. Let them know that you have been thinking about them. Be specific about what is concerning you.

"I've noticed you've been more withdrawn lately. Is everything okay? Do you want to talk?"

"How have you been doing? Do you want to talk about what's been on your mind?"

"I've noticed... How are you feeling?"

"Has anything happened recently that you want to talk about?"

"I'm worried about you."

Even if the person doesn't want to talk or doesn't think there is a problem, knowing that you care and that they can approach you may open up a conversation and help them feel less alone.

Listen

Listening to someone and giving them a space to be heard is often one of the best things you can do for someone who is facing a mental health challenge.

"I'm here for you."

"I would like to hear more about what's been going on for you."

"When is a good time to talk?"

It's our tendency to jump to problem solving when we want to help, but slowing down and just being with the person gives them a chance to feel connected and think about what would be most helpful for them.

Offer support

Be compassionate. If the person's behaviour is out of character, it may mean that a person is experiencing a mental health problem or that they are under some other kind of stress. A comment like "just relax" or "you'll get over it" can come across as judgmental. Instead, show the person that you're there to offer support.

"That sounds really hard."

"What do you need right now?"

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"It sounds like you're experiencing a lot of stress right now. What do you think would be helpful?"

"Would you like to hang out this week?"

"Thank you for sharing this with me."

Be genuine. If the person feels that you are doing this because you care, and are trying to act in their best interest, it is more likely that you'll be able to offer authentic support.

Discuss resources and next steps

Support the person in coming up with a plan. They may have been through something like this before and have an idea of what helps them, or this might be the first time they have felt this way. In any case, they may need support locating resources and identifying coping strategies.

"Have you ever felt this way before? What was helpful in the past?"

"Have you talked to anyone else about this?"

"Have you reached out to your family doctor?"

"Let's talk about what will help you cope right now."

"Would it be helpful if I came with you to your next appointment?"

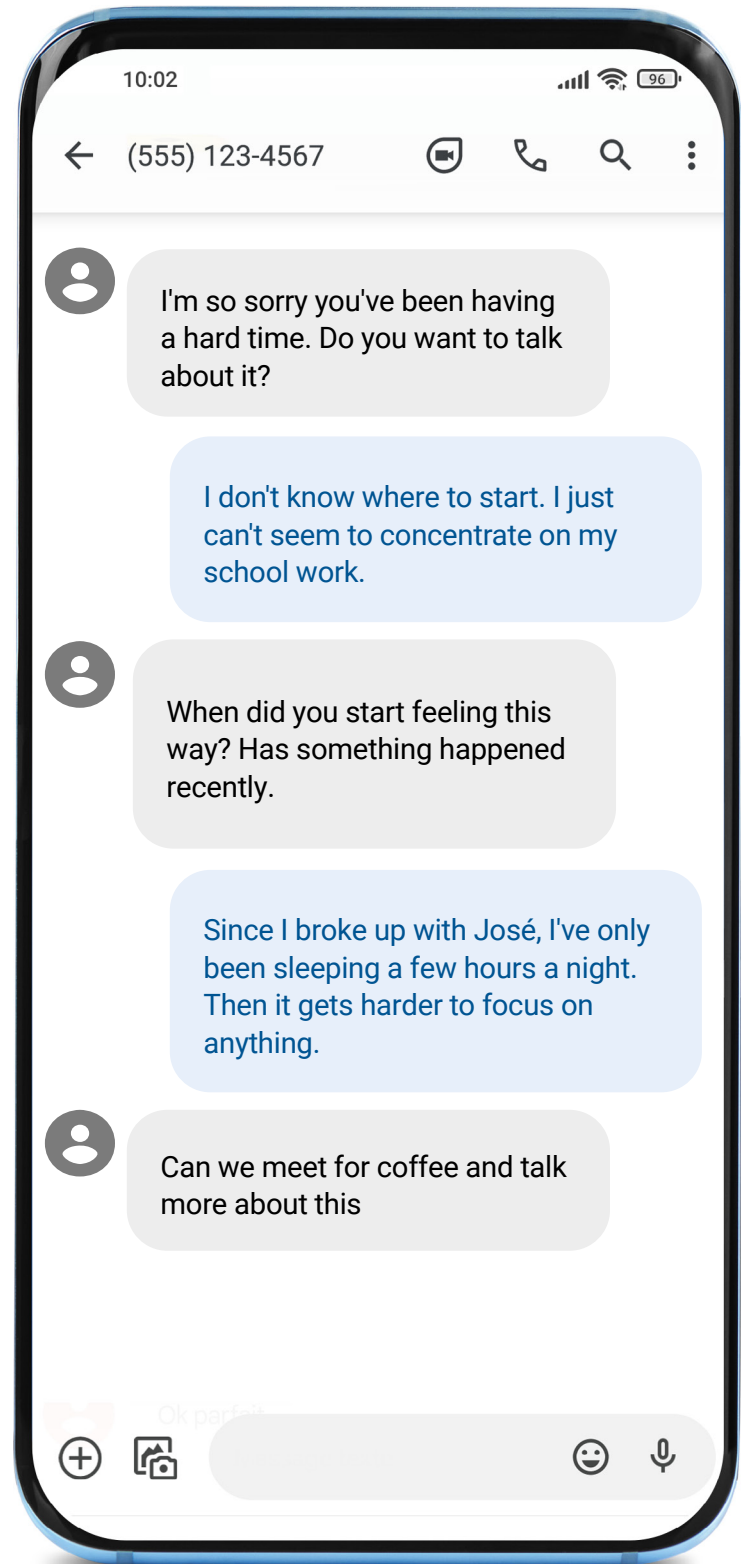
"I can help you look up mental health supports that might work for you."

If they don't believe there's a problem, don't argue with them about it and don't suggest possible solutions. You can keep checking in to see how they're doing or try getting together more often, if that's what they want.

What the conversation might look like

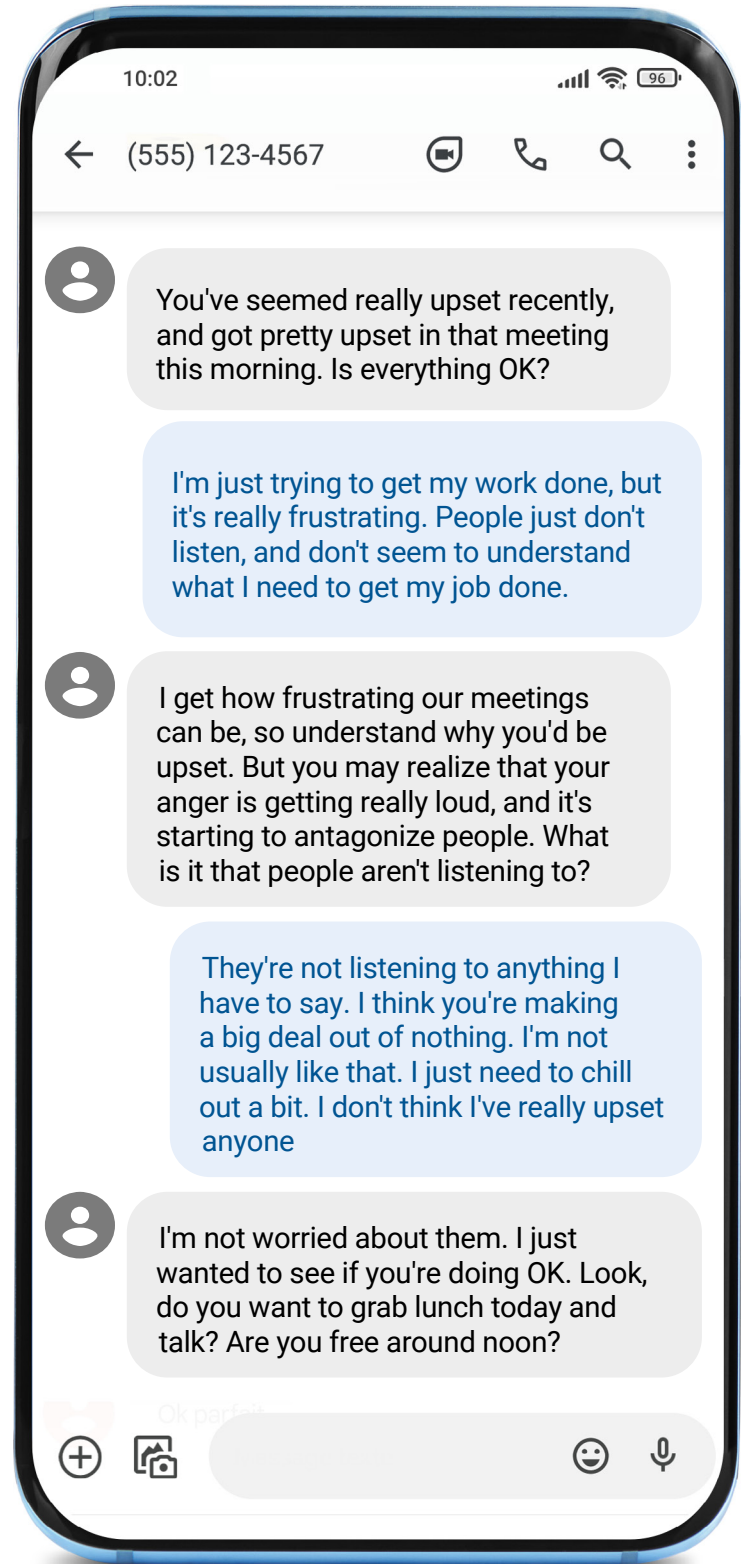
Scenario 1:

"I'm worried about a friend. She hasn't been going to class, and rarely seems to socialize these days."



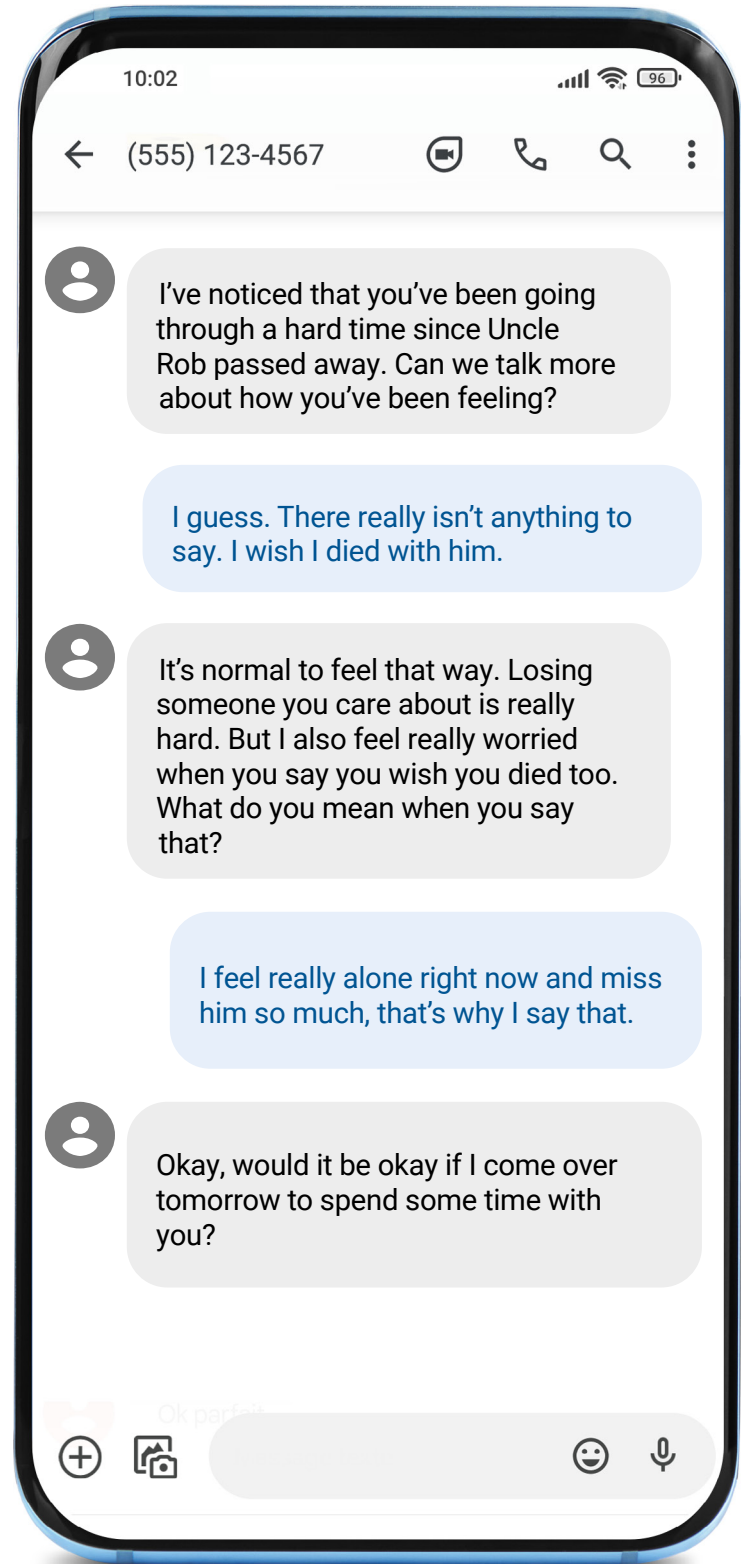
Scenario 2:

“My coworker has been really irritable lately. They have been yelling at colleagues and have been seen storming out of people’s offices.”



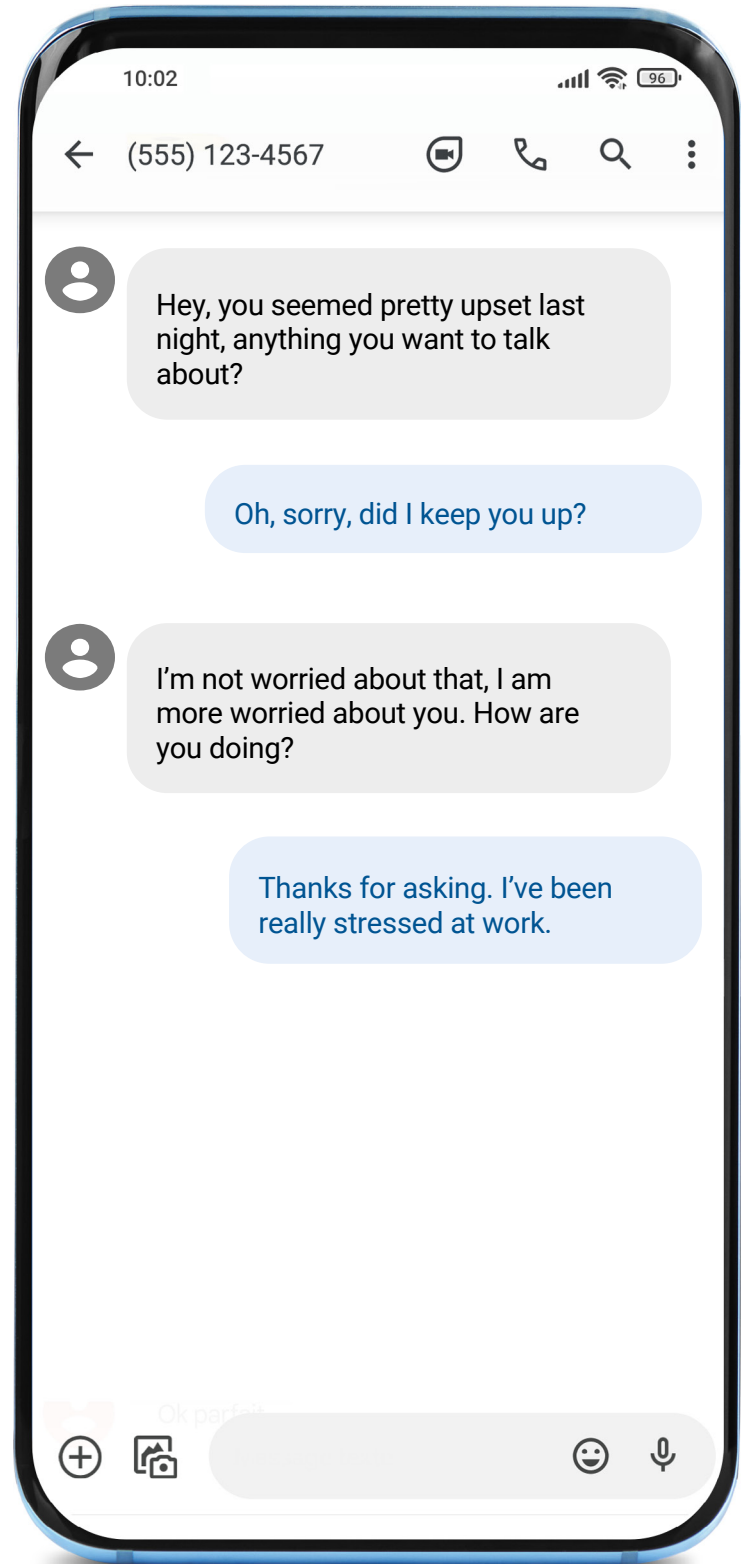
Scenario 3:

“My aunt has been really down since her husband passed away. She keeps talking about how she wishes she had died too.”



Scenario 4:

“My neighbour was yelling in his yard by himself last night and this was the third time this week. I don't know what to do when this happens.”



Getting help

The kind of help people need depends on the type and severity of their problem. Here are some guidelines to help direct you in your interactions with someone who appears to be experiencing mental distress.

<p>Level 1 I'm worried about you</p>	<p>Level 2 You need help now</p>	<p>Level 3 It's an emergency</p>
<p>Observations</p> <p>You notice that the person's mood and/or behaviour has changed without explanation.</p> <p>They are acting out of character.</p> <p>They seem to be in greater distress than usual.</p>	<p>Observations</p> <p>Their mood and/or behaviour has gotten worse.</p> <p>You notice that they have been acting out of character for two or more weeks.</p>	<p>Observations</p> <p>The person describes feeling hopeless and starts talking about killing themselves and ways they would do it.</p> <p>You notice they are becoming more withdrawn, isolated, physically dishevelled and distracted.</p>
<p>Action</p> <p>"I'm worried about you. Have you thought of what kinds of support might help right now?"</p> <p>If the person does suggest that their distress might be mental health-related, you could ask if they have a doctor, a community or spiritual advisor or a counsellor they could speak to.</p> <p>If they don't believe there's a problem, don't disagree or try to suggest possible solutions. Just keep checking in to see how they are doing.</p>	<p>Action</p> <p>"I really don't think this issue can wait. Do you have a doctor or someone you can call?"</p> <p>"Can I help you connect with mental health support?"</p> <p>If the person doesn't want or feel they need to get help, don't push them. Stay supportive. Offer to go to an appointment with them, or ask if you/someone they feel comfortable with could connect with them in the next few days.</p>	<p>Action</p> <p>"Will you let me take you to a nearby emergency department or is there someone else close to you who can take you?"</p> <p>If they refuse help, won't let you or someone else accompany them to an emergency department or other mental health support or are not willing to stay in the company of another person, call 911 to ensure their safety. It is important that they are not left alone.</p>

Resources

I need help now

- Visit your local emergency department or call 911
- Call Kids Help Phone at 1 800 668-6868 or text TALK to 686868
- Call or text 9-8-8 if you are thinking about suicide or worried about someone who may be thinking of suicide

I need support and mental health resources

Contact your health care provider (i.e., family doctor or local health clinic)

Black Youth Helpline: www.blackyouth.ca

Black Youth Helpline serves all youth and specifically responds to the need for a Black youth specific service, positioned and resourced to promote access to professional, culturally appropriate support for youth, families and schools. Their National Helpline for Canadian Youth is available toll-free, 7 days a week by calling 1 833 294-8650.

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA): www.cmha.ca

Over 330 CMHA locations all across Canada provide a wide range of programs, services and supports to step in early to prevent and treat mental health issues in those who are struggling, and to support those with mental illness and their families to live well in the community. These local CMHAs are a good place to start when seeking out services and resources in your community. CMHA offices will refer you to other mental health centres in your area. They also offer many programs and services, ranging from workplace and school programs to counseling, information and support groups, and can help coordinate your care and provide day-to-day support.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) website: www.camh.ca

CAMH is Canada's largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital, as well as one of the world's leading research centres in the area of addiction and mental health. CAMH combines clinical care, research, education, policy development and health promotion to help transform the lives of people affected by mental health and addiction issues.

ConnexOntario: www.connexontario.ca

ConnexOntario operates three helplines: a mental health hotline (1 866 531-2600), an alcohol and other drugs hotline (1 800 565-8603) and a problem gambling helpline (1 888 230-3505). These telephone information lines are confidential, free and available 24/7 for people in Ontario. They provide information about services in your community, basic education and support and strategies to help you reach your goals by phone, email or webchat.

Hope for Wellness Help Line: www.hopeforwellness.ca

The Hope for Wellness Help Line offers immediate help to all Indigenous peoples across Canada. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to offer culturally competent counselling and crisis intervention. Call the toll-free Help Line at 1 855 242-3310 or connect to the online chat at hopeforwellness.ca.

Kids Help Phone: www.kidshelpphone.ca

Kids Help Phone is Canada's only 24/7, national support service that offers professional counselling; information; referrals and volunteer-led, text-based support in both English and French. Call 1 800 668-6868 or text TALK to 686868.

Mood Disorders Society of Canada: www.mooddisorderscanada.ca

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada provides a range of educational programs and resources designed to support persons impacted by mental illness, their families and caregivers. MDSC offers a wide array of training for health care providers, essential workers and employers on mental illnesses, particularly about depression, bipolar disorder and PTSD.

Relief: www.relief.ca

Relief supports people living with anxiety, depression or bipolar disorder, as well as their loved ones; to help them learn to live with the ups and downs of their mental health and to regain power over it. Relief's approach has remained the same since 1991: self-management support. Relief offers 10-week themed group workshops in English and French, virtually or in person; support groups to share with others who are experiencing similar situations.

Schizophrenia Society of Canada: www.schizophrenia.ca

The mission of the Schizophrenia society is: "Build a Canada where people living with early psychosis and schizophrenia achieve their potential." The Society offers education and support programs as well as engages in lobbying to affect public policy and research.

Strongest Families Institute: www.strongestfamilies.com

Strongest Families Institute (SFI) delivers services to children, youth, adults and families living with mild to moderate mental health and other issues through innovative distance-based coaching. SFI equips people with life skills, providing timely support to people in the comfort and privacy of their own homes, day and night.

211's phone number and website: www.211.ca

211 is Canada's main source of information on government and community-based health and social services. Call 211 or visit their website.

Wellness Together Canada: wellnesstogether.ca

Wellness Together Canada is a mental health and substance use website that supports people across Canada as well as Canadians living abroad in both official languages. The online service was launched in response to growing mental health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic and provides immediate support and resources at no cost.

I want to learn more about mental health and mental illness

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA): www.cmha.ca

CMHA's national website offers simple, easy-to-understand information about mental illness, mental health and how to take care of it. Visit the website for [Fast Facts about Mental Health and Mental Illness](#) and to learn more about a range of topics, including [Coping with Loneliness](#), [Care for the Caregiver](#) and [Eating Disorders](#).

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH): www.camh.ca

CAMH's website provides quick access to the best available online information, tools and resources about mental health, including information for clients and families.

The Mental Health and Addiction 101 series are free, quick and easy-to-use online tutorials, which introduce topics concerning substance use and mental health problems: www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-101

Find workshops, interviews and seminars posted as videos, including "Mini-Med School," a series of health sciences lectures offered by CAMH in collaboration with the University of Toronto: <https://www.camh.ca/en/professionals/videos/videos-by-subject>

Canadian Public Health Association

Canadian Public Health Association's "What Are The Social Determinants Of Health?" may be a useful resource for those seeking more information about the social determinants. It can be accessed at: www.cpha.ca/what-are-social-determinants-health

Here to Help (BC): www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Here to Help is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. Here to Help is a collective of seven mental health and addiction agencies that have been working together since 2003 to help prevent and manage mental health and substance use problems.

Jack.org: www.bethere.org

Jack.org is training and empowering young leaders to revolutionize mental health in every province and territory. Through [Jack Talks](#), [Jack Chapters](#), and [Jack Summits](#), young leaders identify and dismantle barriers to positive mental health in their communities. Jack.org's innovations like [Be There](#) and [Jack Originals](#) give people the mental health resources they need to educate themselves.

Multicultural Mental Health Resource Centre (MMHRC): www.mmhrc.ca

This website offers many helpful resources including fact sheets in multiple languages and policy materials on specific topics. Supported by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the MMHRC focuses on improving the quality and availability of mental health services for people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including immigrants, refugees and members of established ethnocultural communities.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (US): www.nami.org

NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the largest grassroots mental health organization in the United States. NAMI advocates for access to services, treatment, supports and research.

National Empowerment Center (US): www.power2u.org

This consumer/survivor/ex-patient-run organization carries a message of recovery, empowerment, hope and healing to people with lived experience of mental health issues, trauma and extreme states.

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (US): www.nimh.nih.gov

This organization offers fact sheets, booklets and brochures on mental health topics.

Articles and other resources

The following resources may be helpful:

Abdillahi, I. & Shaw, A. (2020). *Social Determinants and Inequities in Health for Black Canadians: A Snapshot*. Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). Retrieved from: www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health/social-determinants-inequities-black-canadians-snapshot/health-inequities-black-canadians.pdf

Guruge, S., Birpreet, B. & Samuels-Dennis, J.A. (2015). Health status and health determinants of older immigrant women in Canada: A scoping review. *Journal of Aging Research*. Retrieved from: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4530267

Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). (2018). Inequalities in mental illness hospitalization in Canada. Ottawa: Author. www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/science-research-data/7.Mental%20illness-EN_final.pdf

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I want to learn more about the impact of stigma and how to prevent stigma

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

Visit the APA's webpage on stigma and discrimination, accessible at: www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination

Canadian Public Health Association

The Canadian Public Health Association has put together a resource called Language Matters: Using Respectful Language in Relation to Sexual Health, Substance Use, STBBIs and Intersecting Sources of Stigma. It can be accessed at: www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/resources/stbbi/language-tool-e.pdf

I want to continue the conversation

Bell Let's Talk

Bell Let's Talk encourages you to spread the word about mental health using #BellLetsTalk. For more information and resources to join the conversation, check out Bell.ca/LetsTalk

Kids Help Phone Peer-to-Peer Community: www.kidshelpphone.ca/want-to-talk-to-your-peers-check-out-these-support-forums

The Kids Help Phone Peer-to-Peer Community is a collection of online support forums, co-created by youth, for youth. In the community, youth can anonymously share their personal experiences, offer inspiration and ask questions to connect, comfort and cheer each other on. The forums allow youth to navigate mental health info and support through authentic, real-life experiences in the community.

Mental Health Commission of Canada: www.mentalhealthcommission.ca

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) leads the development and dissemination of innovative programs and tools to support the mental health and wellness of Canadians. Through their website you can access information about mental health in Canada, training opportunities and resources.

Time to Change www.time-to-change.org.uk

Time to Change, an anti-stigma campaign in the UK, has ended but the website is live and has links to their resources. The website offers resources for community conversations, as well as tips and strategies to help you talk openly about mental health with someone you care about.

I want to learn more about trauma

Klinic Community Health Centre

Klinic Community Health Centre has put together a resource called *Trauma-Informed: The Trauma Toolkit*. It can be accessed at: https://trauma-informed.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/trauma-informed_toolkit_v07-1.pdf

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