

LET'S TALK

Why does January seem like such a hard month? I don't think there is any scientific basis for it but there seems to be a perfect storm of depressing factors. It is super cold, days are short, sunlight is minimal, the excitement of Christmas is over, New Year's resolutions are broken, summer and vacations are so far away. There is little wonder that many people struggle with their mental health worse at this time of year than any other.

Are you really okay?

There is such angst in starting a conversation about mental health. Will they think you are weird for asking something personal? Will they think you are being nosy? What if they say NO they are not okay?

It is stressful to be worried about a friend, colleague or family member when you notice changes in them and you may be unsure how to talk to them.

An excellent resource is www.bethere.org. It teaches the average person how to break the ice and start the conversation.

The 5 Golden Rules of Being There

1. ***Say what you see.*** Reach out when you notice something is different. Describe the changes you have noticed and why you are worried. ***Stick to the facts, don't judge, don't make assumptions.***
2. ***Show you care by building trust.*** Support them by being compassionate, helpful, inclusive. Offer practical everyday support like give them a ride, take a few chores off their plate, make a meal or bring their favorite snack.
3. ***Hear them out.*** Be a good listener by finding the balance between listening, asking questions and wisely sharing your experiences. Remember, ***this conversation is about them, not you.***
4. ***Know your role*** and set boundaries to protect your relationship and your own mental health. You are not their therapist or doctor so don't fix, don't preach, ***just be there.***

5. **Connect to help.** Learn how to access professional and community resources and keep following up to ensure they are being supported. Check out Kids's Help Phone www.kidshelpphone.ca/resources-around-me, call 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868. Other resources in Alberta are the Suicide Crisis Helpline 988, Mental Help Line 1-877-303-2642 or crisis support www.alberta.ca/individual-family-crisis.

Conversations around mental health are becoming more common and so is overcoming the stigma around mental illness. Initiatives like [Bell Let's Talk Day](#) Campaign, on (January 24, 2024) have been excellent in engaging Canadians in open and candid discussions about mental illness. Just talking about it isn't enough though, we all need the confidence and knowledge to step up and be there for one another. Not only for kids but also parents, colleagues and friends. When we are prepared to support someone, we can truly make a difference.

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She is a support and advocate for schools, students, parents and caregivers to promote success in school. Tammy has been a Registered Social Worker for more than 25 years and is a mother to 2 teenagers and 2 young adults.