

COMPANIONS

MENTAL ILLNESS



Sometimes, people experiencing mental illness may not feel comfortable—or even able—to tell us what they are going through. They may fear being judged, feel ashamed, or not fully understand their own condition. As Vinnies members and volunteers, it's important to remain observant and compassionate. We may notice changes in behaviour, mood, communication, or appearance that suggest someone is struggling. Even without a formal disclosure, we can respond in ways that are respectful, supportive, and safe.

Meeting with someone who is experiencing mental illness can be challenging—especially if they are withdrawn, distressed, or struggling to articulate how they feel. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, the following guidance draws on Mental Health First Aid principles to help guide a respectful, compassionate, and safe conversation.

The following guidance outlines practical ways to offer support while maintaining dignity, privacy, and care.

How to Approach the Conversation

Start with Respect and Normalcy

Treat the person as you would any other companion—with dignity, kindness, and without judgment. Don't assume they want to talk about their mental health immediately; start by checking in with them generally.

- *"Hi, how have things been going for you lately?"*
- *"We wanted to check in and see how you're feeling. Is there anything you'd like to share today?"*

Use Open, Non-Confrontational Questions

Avoid interrogating or rushing the person. Use open-ended, gentle questions to help them share at their own pace.

- *"It seems like things might be a bit tough right now—do you want to talk about it?"*
- *"Would you like to tell us what's been on your mind lately?"*
- *"What sort of support would feel most helpful for you at the moment?"*



Listen Without Judgment

Prioritise active listening—focus fully on the person, acknowledge what they share, and avoid interrupting or offering immediate solutions.

- *"Thanks for sharing that—it sounds like things have been really heavy lately."*
- *"That must have taken a lot of courage to talk about. I'm glad you felt able to tell us."*

Acknowledge and Normalise Feelings

Let the person know that it's okay to feel what they're feeling, and that you're not here to judge or fix them.

- *"It's completely understandable to feel overwhelmed. You're not alone in this."*
- *"Lots of people go through hard times—it's okay to talk about it."*

Offer Reassurance and Options, Not Solutions

You're not expected to diagnose or solve mental health challenges—but you can help connect the person with support.

- *"If you'd like, we can help you find someone to talk to—like a counsellor or mental health service."*
- *"Would it be okay if we followed up again soon to see how you're doing?"*

If the Person Appears Distressed or Disoriented

- Stay calm and speak slowly and clearly
- Offer reassurance: "You're safe. I'm here with you."
- Avoid confrontation or overreacting
- If they mention self-harm or suicidal thoughts:
 - Stay with them if safe, and call for immediate support
 - Contact Lifeline or 000 if they are at immediate risk
 - Let your President or Regional Support Officer know and document the incident

When Not to Push the Conversation

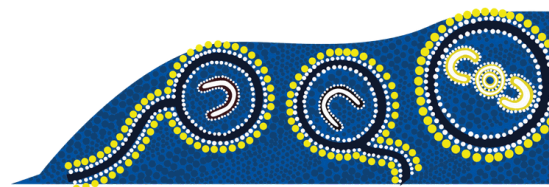
If the person is unable or unwilling to talk, respect their space. You can simply say:

- "That's okay—we're here when you're ready."
- "We care about you, and we want you to feel supported."

TRY THIS

Activity

View this YouTube clip and share your learning with each other
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0zJGDokyWQ>



Support Services

If your situation is life-threatening, call Triple 000 immediately for help or visit your nearest Emergency Department

24/7 Phone Support

- Beyondblue 1300 22 4636
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467
- MensLine Australia 1300 789 978
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800

Other support and information services

- SANE Australia Helpline – call 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- Headspace – 1800 650 890
- Beyond Blue – 1300 224 636
- Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia (PANDA) – 1300 726 306

ACT Support Services

- Gungahlin Mental Health Team – 6205 1110
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services – CAMHS
- CAMHS Northside – 6205 1050
- CAMHS Southside – 6205 1469
- The Way Back Support Service – 1800 929 222
- Canberra Hospital - (02) 5124 0000
- Calvary Hospital - (02) 6201 6111)

