



CONVERSATIONS IN CARE

Quick Guides for CHWs and Care Teams

Practical Tools Rooted in Trust and Respect

Mental Health

Why It Matters:

Talking about mental health can be emotional and overwhelming for families. They may feel confusion, fear, mistrust, stigma, or uncertainty. The best thing to do is respond with empathy, patience, and clarity.

Families need space to process information, ask questions (sometimes more than once), and reassurance that they are not alone. This conversation guide aims to support providers in delivering information with compassion, creating a safe and respectful environment, and connecting families to the resources and support they need as they begin to navigate their journey.

Before the conversation:

- Create a safe, respectful environment.
- Ask what the family already knows or believes.
- Acknowledge that different words, beliefs, or traditions may be different and that it is okay.
- Listen more than you speak at first.

Questions Parents May Have About Mental Health Concerns

What is mental health?

Mental health is how we think, feel, and act. It affects how we handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions.

Sometimes the brain's chemical messengers get out of balance. This can make someone feel very sad, worried, tired, or angry, even if nothing big has happened. This is not anyone's fault and doesn't mean a person is weak. Treatment — like counseling, medicine, or healthy routines — can help restore balance and support a person's ability to enjoy life and care for their family.



Tip: Use simple analogies, e.g., “Just like blood sugar needs balance, our brain chemicals do too.” Normalize seeking help as a sign of strength. Emphasize that mental health affects everyone at some point.

How can we discuss mental health with families who don't recognize the term?

Some cultures may explain behavior changes in spiritual or traditional ways (e.g., evil eye, ancestral influence). That's okay. Focus on what you see: changes in mood, behavior, or interaction.



As a family member, they know their loved one best. It's important to pay attention to signs that something may be wrong.

Look for things like:

- Feeling very sad or hopeless for more than two weeks
- Not sleeping — or sleeping much more than usual
- Eating too much or not eating at all
- Losing interest in things they used to enjoy
- Avoiding people or becoming very quiet
- Getting angry, worried, or upset more easily than before

If they notice these changes, explain it's a sign their loved one may need support but they don't have to go through it alone — there are people who can help, in ways that respect their family's values and beliefs.



Tip: Respect cultural beliefs, avoid medical labels if not familiar. Focus on observable changes and how they affect daily life. Encourage families to notice signs early and seek support.

Culturally Sensitive Practices for Conversations About Mental Health

Understand and validate cultural perspectives.

People understand mental health in different ways. Some may talk about mental health using stories, sayings, or spiritual beliefs. Others may show emotional pain through physical symptoms like headaches or stomach pain.



It's important not to explain mental health only as a medical problem. We should listen, respect each person's way of understanding, and talk in ways that make sense to them.



Tip: Ask families how they understand changes in mood or behavior and respond in familiar terms.

Focus on universal values and experiences.

Everyone feels stress, sadness, worry, or anger at times. Life brings challenges, and we all need ways to cope and feel balanced again.



Taking care of our mental health means finding ways to handle stress, talk about our feelings, and ask for help when we need it. It's a normal part of being human.



Tip: Highlight shared experiences to normalize mental health care.

Explain with culturally relevant terms.

Use language and analogies that are familiar and meaningful within their cultural context.

To help people understand mental health, it helps to connect it to what already matters in their lives. For example, some people turn to prayer, elders, or family when they're struggling. Others find strength in community, storytelling, or traditional healing.

We can talk about mental health in ways that feel familiar — like caring for the soul, finding peace in the heart, or keeping harmony in the home. Mental health care doesn't have to replace these traditions — it can work alongside them.



Tip: Link mental health strategies to existing family or community practices.



Emphasize holistic well-being.

In many cultures, health is seen as a balance between the mind, body, and spirit.

Mental health is part of this balance. When our thoughts and emotions are healthy, it supports our physical health, our relationships, and our sense of peace.

If one part — like the mind — is hurting, the whole person can feel out of balance. Caring for mental health means restoring harmony within ourselves and with others.

It's not just about treating a problem — it's about supporting the whole person so they can live well.



Tip: Explain how supporting mental health is part of caring for the whole person.



Address stigma openly and respectfully.

In some cultures, talking about mental health can feel uncomfortable or even shameful.

People may worry about what others will think, or believe they should stay strong and keep problems to themselves. This can make it hard to ask for help.

It's important to be gentle and respectful in these conversations. We can listen without judgment, honor their feelings, and remind them: needing support is human, not a weakness.

Mental health struggles are nothing to be ashamed of — and there is hope and help available.



Tip: Remind families that mental health struggles are human, common, and treatable.



Highlight collective support and community.

In many cultures, family and community play a big role in health and healing.

Instead of focusing only on the individual, it can help to involve loved ones in mental health support. When families and communities come together, people often feel stronger, more supported, and less alone.

Healing can happen through shared care — by listening, helping each other, and building trust. Mental health is not just one person's journey — it's something we can face together.



Tip: Encourage family or community involvement when appropriate, respecting privacy and consent.



Utilize trusted community channels.

Working with trusted people in the community can make mental health conversations easier and more meaningful.

This might include faith leaders, elders, teachers, or local cultural organizations. These are people families already trust and turn to for guidance.

By partnering with them, we can share helpful information in ways that respect the community's values, build trust, and create safe spaces for support and healing.



Tip: Partner with trusted community figures to increase acceptance and understanding.



Be patient and persistent.

Building trust takes time. Talking about mental health may be new or uncomfortable for some families. They may need time, patience, and repeated conversations to fully understand and feel ready to seek help.

It's important to listen, be respectful, and not rush. Good communication goes both way, by learning from each other, we can build stronger relationships and better support families on their journey.



Tip: Listen actively, respect pacing, and provide consistent support over time.



Note: These questions and responses were gathered from community members and developed with their voices and cultural insight.

