

MODULE

7

“let’s talk”

MENTAL HEALTH



LEARNING GOALS

During this module, participants will:

- Describe key terms used to discuss mental health and mental illness.
- Recognize the stigma surrounding mental illness and the effects of stigma.
- Understand ways that mental health and mental illness can impact a person’s life.
- Describe support and treatment a person may receive to promote positive mental health and well-being, and to recover from mental illness.

DEFINE THE ISSUE

Mental health and mental illness are two terms that are often used interchangeably. By definition, health is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being and not the absence of disease. Mental health is not the same as mental illness. It is determined by a variety of factors, including our genetics and the environment. It also determines how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.

Mental illness, on the other hand, is a health condition(s) that involves changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior (or a combination of the 3). Mental illnesses can be linked to distress and/or problems functioning in society. A wide variety of mental illness diagnoses are common among young people, including anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and depression or other mood disorders. Signs of mental illness in youth can be both physical and mental, such as difficulty sleeping, changes in eating habits, withdrawing from social interactions, persistent sadness, and drastic changes in mood, behavior, or personality.

Youth experiencing or at risk for homelessness have higher rates of mental health issues, with a lack of access to adequate mental healthcare. In addition to the day-to-day struggles of not having a place to lay their heads at night, youth experiencing homelessness face many challenges in their day to day lives, including high rates of trauma and abuse. Thus, it is not surprising that many youth experiencing homelessness struggle with poor mental health and higher rates of mental illness than the general population. They also face limited access to mental health care.

In addition, mental health is one of the most common reasons young people reach out to the National Runaway Safeline for support, many while they are still at home. This underscores the need for mental health education and support services as critical tools that can prevent runaway episodes and homelessness.





In this module, participants will learn about mental health, self-care strategies to help manage their mental health, how to have conversations with their peers about mental health, and when to involve a trusted adult or professional in a mental health crisis.

ICONS

For further details, see the Introduction Module.



MODULE ACTIVITIES

	ACTIVITY	TIME	METHODOLOGY
	A. The Importance of Optimal Mental Health	15 minutes	Discussion/Activity
	B. How to Start the Conversation about Mental Health	15 minutes	Discussion/Activity
	C. Starting the Conversation	20 minutes	Discussion/Activity
	D. When Do I Involve an Adult or Professional?	10 minutes	Discussion/Activity
	Total time required: 60 minutes		

MATERIALS

- “Self-Care Strategies” worksheet
- “How to Start the Conversation” handout
- “Starting the Conversation Scenarios” handout
- “Active Listening Techniques” handout
- “When to Involve an Adult or Professional” handout

ACTIVITY 7A

THE IMPORTANCE OF OPTIMAL MENTAL HEALTH



15 minutes

INTRODUCE the topic of mental health.

STATE As we get started, it is important to clarify that we will be discussing mental health, not mental illness, today. They are not the same. Mental health is determined by a variety of factors including our genetics and the environment. It also determines how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. Mental illness is a health condition(s) that involves changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior (or a combination of the 3) and can be linked to distress and/or problems functioning in society.

When we talk about optimal mental health, we are referring to the presence of positive emotions and good functioning in individual and social environments. It's the basis for individual well-being and functioning. With good mental health, individuals can realize their own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life and make a positive impact in their life. Having good mental health doesn't mean you'll never be sad or experience emotionally challenging times. It doesn't mean that there is an absence of mental illness either. Positive mental health also helps build mental resilience that enables individuals to bounce back, cope, recover, or even thrive in the face of stressful or emotionally difficult situations. And while optimal mental health is not an innate characteristic of a person, it is something that can be cultivated.

ASK What do you think defines a mentally healthy person?

DISCUSS responses.

Sample responses might include:

- Ability to handle stress and challenges
- Has positive coping skills
- Has positive and healthy relationships
- Can function in daily life and handle associated activities (e.g., school, work, family responsibilities)

STATE It is important to remember that mental health looks different for every person. Dealing with a mental illness does not take away someone's ability to be well. Optimal mental health is reflected in:

- Positive emotions
- Functioning well in all aspects of life including relationships and family
- Participation in meaningful activities
- Coping with stressful situations in a healthy way and demonstrating resilience

ACTIVITY 7A →

ACTIVITY 7A CONTINUED

STATE Some questions to consider when determining if you or someone else has optimal mental health are:

- Is there a balance of school, work, rest, and sleep in your life?
- Do you enjoy fulfilling relationships with others?
- Have you learned strategies for maintaining positive mental health?
- Are you able to bounce back after a challenge and learn from the experience?

HAND OUT “Self-Care Strategies” worksheet.

STATE It is important to incorporate activities into our lives that make us feel centered and help us manage stress in order to maintain optimal mental health. Some strategies for managing our mental health and practicing self-care could include:

- Meditation or mindfulness
- Exercise
- Deep Breathing
- Engaging in activities you enjoy, such as reading, writing, and drawing
- Talking with someone you trust
- Connecting with community: reach out to friends, family, teammates, teachers, religious communities, etc.
- Taking information breaks: from social media, the Internet, news, etc.

You will see there is space on the worksheet to include activities or strategies you already use to help you manage stress. You could also list ones you don’t currently use but would like to try. Take about two minutes to think about these and write them down.

ALLOW 2 minutes for participants to complete the worksheet.

ASK Are there any questions or comments?

DISCUSS responses.

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

It is important to incorporate activities into our lives that make us feel centered and help us manage stress to maintain optimal mental health.

Strategies for managing our mental health and practicing self-care could include:

- Meditation or mindfulness
- Exercise
- Deep breathing
- Engaging in activities you enjoy, such as reading, writing, and drawing
- Talking with someone you trust
- Connecting with community: reach out to friends, family, teammates, teachers, religious communities, etc.
- Taking information breaks: from social media, the Internet, news, etc.

What strategies do you use to help manage your stress and/or practice self-care?
List them below:

ACTIVITY 7B

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH



15 minutes

INTRODUCE the importance of being a supportive person when someone is struggling with their mental health.

STATE There may be a time when someone close to you may be experiencing a difficult situation. You may not always know how serious the situation might be and how to provide help when someone needs it. So how can you support someone that is struggling with their mental health? As we go through our discussion, put yourself in their shoes and consider how you would like to be supported if you reached out to someone for help.

ASK What things could potentially motivate someone to seek help, or tell someone about a stressful and difficult situation?

DISCUSS responses.

Sample responses might include:

- They are overwhelmed
- They want to change what they are experiencing
- They are afraid for or concerned about someone else

ASK Why is the language we use when talking about mental health important?

DISCUSS responses.

Sample responses might include:

- To reduce stigma
- To make people feel heard
- To make people feel safe and supported
- To let people know they can talk to you again if they need to

ASK What responses to someone telling you about a stressful or difficult situation could be potentially harmful?

DISCUSS responses.

Sample responses might include:

- That doesn't sound too bad compared to [some other situation]
- Don't be so dramatic
- That can't be true

ACTIVITY 7B →

ACTIVITY 7B CONTINUED

STATE To summarize this discussion, we will review some important DOs and DON'Ts for how to start a conversation about mental health.

HAND OUT “How to Start the Conversation” handout.

READ the “How to Start the Conversation” handout out loud as participants read along.

ASK Are there any questions?

DISCUSS responses.

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION

It is important to let people know that you are willing to talk about mental health. Talking about it directly is a first step in discussing mental health concerns. **To start the conversation, share an statement of care followed by an observation.**

DO ...



Check in with yourself first. It can be as simple as asking yourself “how am I doing?” (Yeager, 2022). Make sure you are in a mental place where you are able to provide support and put other things aside in order to pay attention. While it is important to be there for others, it is important to first be there for yourself. If you’re not attending to yourself, it may be difficult to provide the support someone needs. When you are ready to be there for someone, here are important steps to take:

Listen: Listening is an important skill in all areas of life. Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues they may be reflecting. Listen without judging or jumping to conclusions.

Be an advocate: Let them know that you understand and that they are not alone.

Keep things confidential: Unless they are life threatening to themselves or others.

Pay attention: Putting everything aside to give complete attention to the person that is talking is a great way to practice active listening. Paying attention may take form in different ways; it may include eye contact, directing your attention to only the person talking, and waiting for your turn to speak.

DON'T ...



Minimize: Be mindful of what others are experiencing. Confiding in someone is not always easy and saying that it could be worse is unhelpful and hurtful.

Argue: Listen to understand instead of arguing back or trying to convince or change someone’s beliefs. They may not realize they’re experiencing symptoms of a mental health concern.

Use stigmatizing language: When talking about mental health concerns, using person-first language prevents the use of stigmatizing language that labels people and affirms that a person’s identity is more than the circumstance or situation they are currently experiencing. For example, rather than saying, “She’s depressed,” you should say, “She is dealing with depression.”

Force someone to talk to you: While it is important to make it known that you are there to support someone going through a struggle, it can take time for someone to feel comfortable discussing their experiences.

ACTIVITY 7C

STARTING THE CONVERSATION



20 minutes

INTRODUCE the “Starting the Conversation” activity.

STATE Drawing on the information we just learned, we are now going to practice having conversations about mental health using example scenarios. There are some hints listed with each scenario to help guide potential responses.

I will be handing out two handouts: one with the scenarios and the other with some tips to help you listen and communicate more effectively in difficult or serious situations. You may have already received the “Active Listening Techniques” handout in a previous module. This handout also supplements a lot of the information already shared in the “How to Start the Conversation” handout with DOs and DON’Ts.

HAND OUT the “Starting the Conversation Scenarios” and “Active Listening Techniques” handouts.

READ Scenario 1:

You are worried about your friend, Jackson. Jackson is in 11th grade and working part time at a restaurant on top of being a full-time student and the president of the biology club. Recently, he’s expressed that he is having trouble balancing work and school, but he can’t stop working or he won’t be able to afford groceries and other necessities. He usually sits at the very front of class and is on top of his schoolwork. You notice that he starts coming to class late despite always being punctual previously and starts sitting at the back of class. When you ask Jackson how he is doing he tells you he is just anxious and wants to go home and sleep. Since you’ve known Jackson for so long, you know this isn’t typical behavior for him. You’re worried that he has too much on his plate and it is taking a toll on his mental health.

HINT:

- Acknowledge and validate feelings and concerns
- What positive coping strategies could be helpful for Jackson?
- Consider any resources you could connect him with

ASK How would you approach the situation?

DISCUSS responses.

Sample responses might include:

- Tell Jackson you're worried he has too much on his plate and it's taking a toll on his mental health
- Ask Jackson if there is anything you can do to help with his biology club responsibilities so he can focus on work and school
- Ask Jackson if it would be helpful to study together
- Try connecting Jackson to a place where he can get some free groceries so he can take a shift off and catch up

READ Scenario 2:

Elena is 16 years old, has a baby of her own and lives at home with her mom and her mom's boyfriend. Elena has been your friend since middle school and comes over to your house almost every week. Elena is dealing with a very stressful home environment where she routinely witnesses her mom's boyfriend abuse her mom. Her mom's boyfriend has never physically harmed Elena, but Elena is worried about her mom's safety and is stressed about her child being in that environment. Elena wants to leave home but is not sure about what steps to take next. She confides in you and mentions that she has been talking to a guidance counselor at school about stress at home but has not mentioned the domestic abuse for fear her baby will get taken away.

HINT:

- Express empathy and understanding
- Are there people Elena trusts that could help?
- Are there resources available to Elena and her family?

ASK How would you engage in conversation with Elena?

DISCUSS responses.

Sample responses might include:

- Ask what you can do to help
- Ask if she wants to spend some time outside the house with you
- Encourage her to talk to the guidance counselor about the domestic abuse

READ Scenario 3:

You are worried about your friend, Imani. Imani is 13 years old, and you have known her since kindergarten. You have noticed that for the past month she has seemed sad and much quieter than usual. Despite usually being very energetic and participating in class activities, Imani recently has begun to sit silently in the back of the classroom. She also recently quit the extracurricular activities she was involved in and has stopped doing things with you and her other friends on the weekends. You're worried about Imani and ask her how she is doing. She responds that everything is fine and seems annoyed with the question. After being friends with Imani for so many years, you know that this behavior is not usual for her. You're worried that Imani is struggling with something that is impacting her mental health but doesn't want to talk about it.

HINT:

- Remember that you can't force someone to confide in you, but you can support them in other ways
- Consider what resources you could share with Imani

ASK How would you approach the situation with Imani?**DISCUSS** responses.

Sample responses might include:

- Respect her boundaries, but let her know you are there if she needs you
- Ask Imani if there is anything you can do to help
- Invite Imani to social activities

ASK Are there any other questions or comments?**DISCUSS** responses.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION SCENARIOS

Directions: Consider how you would approach a conversation in the scenarios listed below.

SCENARIO 1

You are worried about your friend, Jackson. Jackson is in 11th grade and working part time at a restaurant on top of being a full-time student and the president of the biology club. Recently, he's expressed that he is having trouble balancing work and school, but he can't stop working or he won't be able to afford groceries and other necessities. He usually sits at the very front of class and is on top of his schoolwork. You notice he starts coming to class late despite always being punctual previously and starts sitting at the back of class. When you ask Jackson how he is doing he tells you he is just anxious and wants to go home and sleep. Since you've known Jackson for so long, you know this isn't typical behavior for him. You're worried that he has too much on his plate and it is taking a toll on his mental health.

HINT

- Acknowledge and validate feelings and concerns
- What positive coping strategies could be helpful for Jackson?
- Consider any resources you could connect him with

SCENARIO 2

Elena is 16 years old, has a baby of her own and lives at home with her mom and her mom's boyfriend. Elena has been your friend since middle school and comes over to your house almost every week. Elena is dealing with a very stressful home environment where she routinely witnesses her mom's boyfriend abuse her mom. Her mom's boyfriend has never physically harmed Elena, but Elena is worried about her mom's safety and is stressed about her child being in that environment. Elena wants to leave home but is not sure about what steps to take next. She confides in you and mentions that she has been talking to a guidance counselor at school about stress at home but has not mentioned the domestic abuse for fear her baby will get taken away.

HINT

- Express empathy and understanding
- Are there people Elena trusts that could help?
- Are there resources available to Elena and her family?

SCENARIO 3

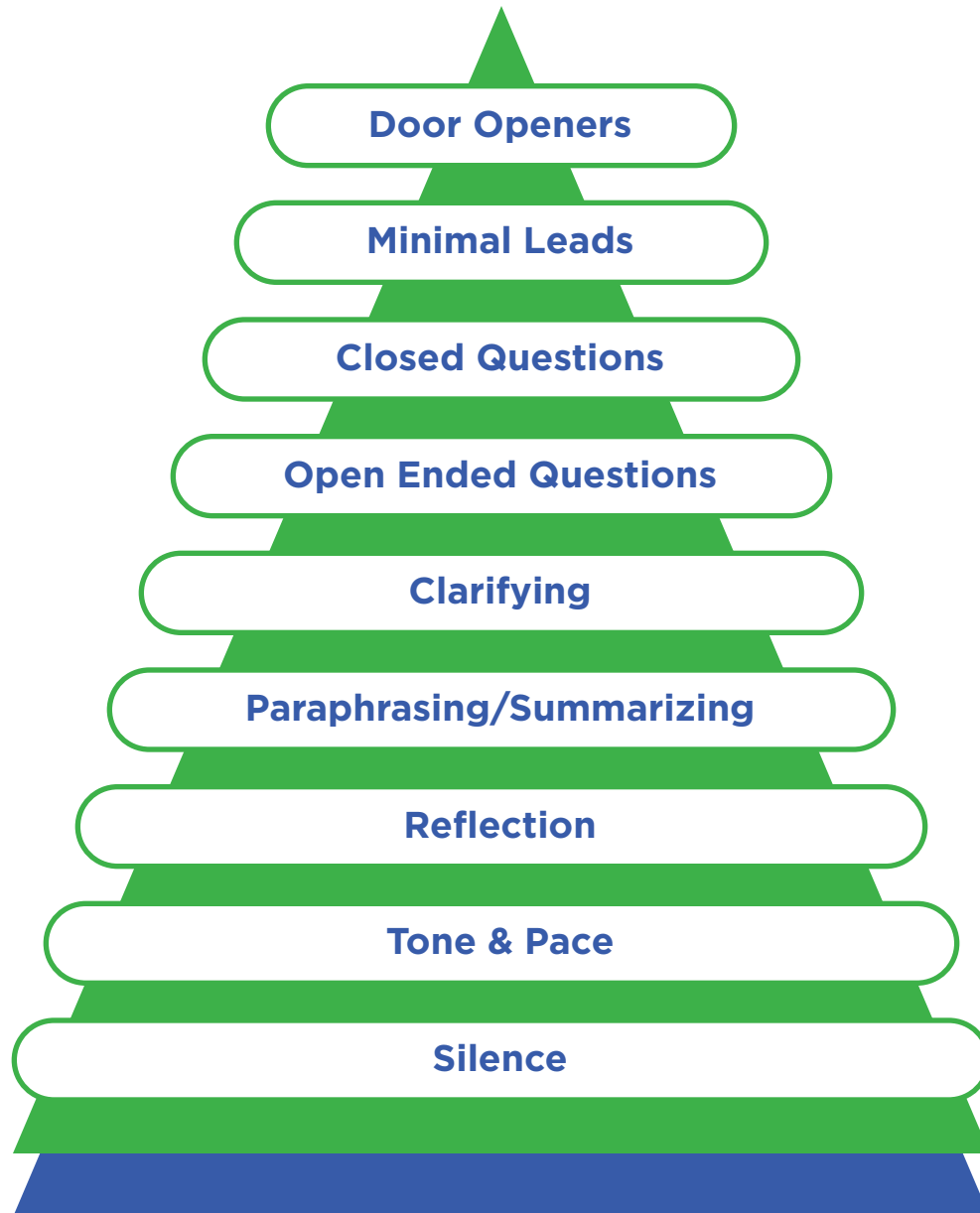
You are worried about your friend, Imani. Imani is 13 years old, and you have known her since kindergarten. You have noticed that for the past month she has seemed sad and much quieter than usual. Despite usually being very energetic and participating in class activities, Imani recently has begun to sit silently in the back of the classroom. She also recently quit the extracurricular activities she was involved in and has stopped doing things with you and her other friends on the weekends. You're worried about Imani and ask her how she is doing. She responds that everything is fine and seems annoyed with the question. After being friends with Imani for so many years, you know this behavior is not usual for her. You're worried that Imani is struggling with something that is impacting her mental health but doesn't want to talk about it.

HINT

- Remember that you can't force someone to confide in you, but you can support them in other ways
- Consider what resources you could share with Imani

ACTIVE LISTENING TECHNIQUES

Active listening involves demonstrating interest, empathy, and understanding. Using active listening techniques can help create a safe and supportive space for someone to share their experiences and feelings. The pillars of this pyramid are key elements of active listening.



Door Openers

Start the conversation with open-ended questions or statements that show you are ready to listen and provide support. For example, you could say, “What’s going on?” or “I’m here to listen if you want to talk.”

Minimal Leads

Use verbal cues like “Mhmm,” “I see,” or “Alright” to show that you are engaged and attentive during the conversation. These small responses encourage the person to continue sharing their thoughts and feelings.

Closed Questions

While open-ended questions are essential for encouraging deeper conversation, closed questions that can be answered with a yes or no can also be helpful at times. For example, you might ask, “How long has this been going on?” or “Have you told anyone else about this?”

Open-Ended Questions

Encourage the person to share more by asking open-ended questions that show you genuinely want to learn about their experiences. For instance, you could ask, “Can you tell me more about what is happening?”

Clarifying

If the person mentions something unfamiliar or unclear, ask clarifying questions to ensure you understand their perspective fully. For instance, you might ask, “What do you mean by that?”

Paraphrasing/Summarizing

Repeat some of the words and phrases the person used during the conversation. This technique can help them feel heard and understood. For example, you might say, “It sounds like this has been going on for a long time.”

Reflection

Go deeper in understanding their emotions and feelings by reflecting back on what they said. This can show that you’re actively trying to comprehend the underlying emotions. For instance, you could say, “It seems like you’re feeling overwhelmed by everything that’s going on.”

Tone and Pace

Be mindful of your tone and pace during the conversation. Speak with a calming and supportive tone and allow the person to speak at their own pace.

Silence

Be comfortable with moments of silence. Sometimes, the person may need time to process their thoughts or emotions, and silence allows them the space to do so.

ACTIVITY 7D

WHEN DO I INVOLVE AN ADULT OR PROFESSIONAL?



10 minutes

STATE Some situations may require more support than what you can manage yourself or provide to a friend on your own. We will now review some considerations to help us evaluate when it may be necessary to involve adults or professionals to help ourselves or others.

HAND OUT “When to Involve an Adult or Professional” handout.

READ the “When to Involve an Adult or Professional” handout out loud as participants read along.

ASK Are there any questions?

DISCUSS responses.

STATE Remember, you can always call or text the National Runaway Safeline at 1-800-RUNAWAY or chat with them online at 1800RUNAWAY.org if you do not know what to do. They are there to listen and help 24/7 and can connect you to other resources that may be able to assist as well.

WHEN TO INVOLVE AN ADULT OR PROFESSIONAL

There are many options to consider when seeking help. Dealing with a mental health issue can be incredibly difficult. Know that there are people who care and will guide you in seeking the help you need.

While symptoms of stress and different mental health conditions can vary, potential signs that someone may need support from an adult or professional include:

- Prolonged feelings of sadness or feeling excessively low
- Loss of interest in activities and social interactions
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits
- Increased substance use
- Lack of energy or fatigue
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide
- Auditory or visual hallucinations
- Paranoia
- Experiencing increased mood changes, such as extreme highs and lows
- Increased worrying and fear

If you or another person is experiencing a mental health crisis and/or are considering suicide:

- Call or text the **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** 24/7 at 988 or chat with them at 988lifeline.org.
- Call or text the **National Runaway Safeline** at 1-800-RUNAWAY or chat with them at 1800RUNAWAY.org.

If you are concerned that you or someone you know is in immediate danger:

- **CALL 911** as soon as possible.

If someone is not in immediate danger and you find yourself seeking help from others on their behalf, it is important to think which adults may be able to help.

- **CONSIDER** which adults are likely to understand what is going on. This could be a family member, teacher, coach, doctor, or school counselor.
- **FIND** an adult who is responsible and that is someone you trust to know about your situation. This person could also be someone who you or your friends feel comfortable around and will support you.
- **SET** expectations with your friend or peer before you involve an adult. Share your concern and ask them to take action on their own by a certain date before you step in so they know what you are doing and why.
- **TELL** them you have their current and future well-being at heart.
- **REMEMBER** that if you are seeking help for a friend, they might be upset you told someone at first. A friend might not recognize they need support from an adult. Expect that you may have broken trust and the relationship may change in the short term.
- **WRITE** down your thoughts and observations about the situation before you involve an adult or professional. These conversations can be hard to have but having a reference sheet can organize your thoughts and ease the nerves you might have when involving someone else.

Taking Care of Yourself

It's normal to feel worried, stressed, or sad about a friend or peer experiencing a mental health challenge. It's important to remember to take care of yourself while supporting someone else. Take time to engage in self-care activities and to talk to someone about how you are feeling.

If you are still not sure where to turn to for support, you can always call or text the National Runaway Safeline at 1-800-RUNAWAY or chat with them online at 1800RUNAWAY.org. They are there to listen and to help 24/7 and can connect you to other resources that may be able to assist as well.

HANDOUTS AND WORKSHEETS

- A. Self-Care Strategies
- B. How to Start the Conversation
- C. Starting the Conversation Scenarios
- D. Active Listening Techniques
- E. When to Involve an Adult or Professional

REFERENCES

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RESOURCES

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

24/7 confidential support for people in distress and/or considering suicide

Call or text: 988

Online chat also available

988lifeline.org

Jed Foundation

Text: HOME to 741-741

Call: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

jedfoundation.org/mental-health-resource-center/

National Runaway Safeline

24/7 confidential information, resources, and support for young people in crisis, who have run away or are considering leaving home, and experiencing homelessness

Call or text: 1-800-786-2929

Online chat and email also available

1800runaway.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Confidential treatment referral and information service for individuals facing mental and/or substance use disorders

Call: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

World Health Organization Mental Health Disorders

Provides information about specific mental health conditions and symptoms

who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders