Community Conversations About Mental Health

Discussion Guide



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA
www.samhsa.gov • 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
www.samhsa.gov

On January 16, 2013, President Barack Obama directed Secretary Kathleen Sebelius of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Secretary Arne Duncan of the U.S. Department of Education to launch a national conversation on mental health to reduce the shame and secrecy associated with mental illness, encourage people to seek help if they are struggling with mental health problems, and encourage individuals whose friends or family are struggling to connect them to help.

Mental health problems affect nearly every family. Yet as a nation, we have too often struggled to have an open and honest conversation about these issues. Misperceptions, fears of social consequences, discomfort associated with talking about these issues with others, and discrimination all tend to keep people silent. Meanwhile, if they get help, most people with mental illnesses can and do recover and lead happy, productive, and full lives.

This national conversation will give Americans a chance to learn more about mental health issues. People across the nation are planning community conversations to assess how mental health problems affect their communities and to discuss topics related to the mental health of young people. In so doing, they may also decide how they might take steps to improve mental health in their families, schools, and communities. This could include a range of possible steps to establish or improve prevention of mental illnesses, promotion of mental health, public education and awareness, early identification, treatment, crisis response, and recovery supports available in their communities.

Pamela S. Hyde, J.D.
Administrator
SAMHSA

Paolo del Vecchio, MSW
Director
Center for Mental Health Services
SAMHSA

Goals and Objectives of the Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health

The Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health is designed to help individuals and organizations who want to organize community conversations achieve three potential objectives:

- Get others talking about mental health to break down misperceptions and promote recovery and healthy communities;
- Find innovative community-based solutions to mental health needs, with a focus on helping young people; and
- Develop clear steps for communities to address their mental health needs in a way that complements existing local activities.

The *Toolkit* includes:

1. An *Information Brief* section that provides data and other facts regarding mental health and mental illness and how communities can improve prevention of mental illnesses, promotion of mental health, public education and awareness, early identification, treatment, crisis response, and recovery supports available in their communities.
2. A *Discussion Guide* section that is intended for use in holding community conversation meetings of 8-12 people each. (In a community forum with more participants, the audience would divide into groups of this size for much of their time together.) It provides discussion questions, sample views, ideas, and an overall structure for dialogue and engagement on mental health issues.
3. A *Planning Guide* section that describes a variety of ways in which people can facilitate their community conversations and take next steps at the local level to raise awareness about mental health and promote access to mental health services.

Mental health issues in our communities—particularly for our youth—are complex and challenging; but, by coming together and increasing our understanding and raising awareness, we can make a difference.

The Discussion Guide for Community Conversations About Mental Health

The *Discussion Guide* provides an example of how you could choose to structure a community conversation. This four-session model includes topic ideas and related questions, as well as tips for facilitators. The sequence, content, and timing of these sessions could be adjusted for conversations of different lengths and audiences.

This guide is a source of suggestions and should be adapted to fit local needs. It is intended to inform conversations on increasing education and awareness about mental health. It is not intended to support, facilitate, or in any other way encourage external parties to communicate with government officials to effect legislative or policy changes.

Community Conversations About Mental Health

Discussion Guide



Table of Contents

Goals and Objectives of the Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health ii

The Discussion Guide for Community Conversations About Mental Health ii

Overview of Session Ideas 1

Session 1: Sharing Personal Experiences 2

Session 2: Discussion of Challenges 4

Session 3: Exploration of How to Respond 6

Session 4: Community Solutions 9

Facilitation Tips and Recommendations 11

Appendix: Helpful Resources and Websites 12

Acknowledgments

This guide was prepared for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) by Abt Associates and its subcontractors the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and Everyday Democracy under contract number [HHSS283200700008I/HHSS28342002T] with SAMHSA, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). L. Wendie Veloz and Chris Marshall served as the Government Project Officers.

Disclaimer

The views, opinions, and content of this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of SAMHSA or HHS. The listing of any non-Federal resources is not all-inclusive and inclusion in this publication does not constitute endorsement by SAMHSA or HHS.

Public Domain Notice

All material appearing in this report is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission from SAMHSA. Citation of the source is appreciated. However, this publication may not be reproduced or distributed for a fee without the specific, written authorization of the Office of Communications, SAMHSA, HHS.

Electronic Access and Printed Copies

This publication may be downloaded or ordered at **http://store.samhsa.gov**. Or call SAMHSA at 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727) (English and Español).

Recommended Citation

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Community Conversations About Mental Health: Information Brief. HHS Publication No. SMA-13-4765. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013.

Originating Office

Office of Communications, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1 Choke Cherry Road, Rockville, MD 20857. HHS Publication No. SMA-13-4764. Published July 2013.

SAMHSA Descriptor

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities.

Overview of Session Ideas



Session 1: Sharing Personal Experiences

Opening Question: What does mental health mean to me? To us as a community?
(Recommended Time Allocation: 90 minutes)

Potential Objectives:

- Set discussion guidelines.
- Get to know each other.
- Talk about what mental health means to each of us and to our community.

Session 2: Discussion of Challenges

Opening Question: What are the challenges and factors we should consider?
(Recommended Time Allocation: 90 minutes)

Potential Objectives:

- Take a look at some of the data about mental health.
- Identify the challenges we face as a community in addressing these issues.
- Identify the factors affecting mental health for young people.
- Examine our different beliefs about mental health and how we can find common ground to overcome challenges.

Session 3: Exploration of How to Respond

Opening Question: What can we do to support young people?
(Recommended Time Allocation: 90 minutes)

Potential Objectives:

- Consider different ways to improve mental health for young people.
- Begin to identify specific areas that we might want to work on locally.

Session 4: Community Solutions

Opening Question: What steps do we want to take as a community?
(Recommended Time Allocation: 90 minutes)

Potential Objectives:

- Decide on next steps.
- Decide how each of us wants to be involved.

Session 1: Sharing Personal Experiences

What does mental health mean to me? To us as a community?

Before we get to the question of what we can do, it is important to understand the issues and how they affect us. We all have personal experiences that inform and motivate our actions. It is important to share more about those experiences and discuss why we care about mental health issues. In doing this we can relate to each other better and develop a common understanding that is foundational to creating community solutions.

Objectives of this session:

- Set discussion guidelines.
- Get to know each other.
- Talk about what mental health means to each of us and to our community.

Part 1: Setting guidelines (10 minutes)

What guidelines or ground rules do you want to set for your discussion? Here are some examples:

- Listen with respect.
- Each person gets a chance to talk.
- One person talks at a time. Don't cut people off.
- When sharing, speak about yourself and your personal experiences.
- It's OK to disagree with someone else—in fact, it can be helpful—but personal attacks are never appropriate.
- Help the facilitator keep things on track.
- After this event is over, it is OK to share the main ideas discussed in the small group but not OK to link specific comments to specific people ("He said … and she answered….").

Part 2: Starting the discussion (30 minutes)

1. Each person: Introduce yourself and say a little about why you wanted to be part of this discussion.
2. Take thirty seconds: Think of just one word, phrase, or image that relates to why you think it is difficult for us to talk about mental health issues. Write it down if you wish, or draw a picture. Then we will go around the circle and share each person's effort.

Tips for Facilitators

- Welcome everyone.
- Explain that you will be facilitating the discussion—**not** joining in with your own opinions.
- The session has four parts—use the amount of time suggested for each as a guide.
- Take your time with the first few questions—they give people a chance to say why they care. Go around the circle and make sure everyone has a chance to answer.
- After that, you don't have to go around the circle in order—just make sure everyone has a chance to speak if they want to.
- You don't have to cover every question listed here, and you may have questions you want to add. Choose the questions that you think will work best for your group.
- If your group identifies ideas for community solutions during this discussion, put them up on a piece of newsprint or flipchart under the heading **Next Steps**, and make it clear to the group that they will be turning to these later in the sessions.



3. Take a look at pages 1-2 in the *Information Brief* section of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health*, including the definitions of mental health and mental illness.

    - What are your reactions to the information provided?
    - Are there items that you don't agree with or want more information on?

Part 3: What does mental health mean to me? What does mental health mean to us? (30 minutes)

- What experiences in your life, your work, or your family inform what you believe about mental health?
- In your experience, how are mental health issues affecting young people and the schools? If you are a young person, how do mental health issues affect you and your peers?
- Do you think your cultural background influences how you think about mental health? If so, how?
- Why is mental health an important or not so important issue in your community?
- In your experience, how are mental health issues in the community intertwined with issues of substance abuse? How are they intertwined with physical health on an individual or community level?

Part 4: Wrapping up (20 minutes)

1. What new insights did you gain from this discussion?
2. What themes kept occurring throughout this discussion?
3. What do we still need to talk about—what areas do we want to be sure to cover in our discussions?

Session 2: Discussion of Challenges

Tips for Facilitators

The session has four parts— you can use the amount of time suggested for each as a guide.

What are the challenges and factors we should consider?

To make progress on mental health issues, we need to think strategically about the challenges we are facing and the factors that have the greatest influence on mental health—particularly those that affect young people. This session will help you consider some of those challenges and factors and begin thinking about how to address them.

Objectives of this session:

- Take a look at some of the data about mental health.
- Identify the challenges we face as a community in addressing these issues.
- Identify the factors affecting mental health for young people.
- Examine our different beliefs about mental health and how we can find common ground to overcome challenges.

Part 1: What impacts the mental health of youth and of our community? (15 minutes)

Take a look at pages 7-10 in the *Information Brief* section of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health.*

- What are your reactions to the information presented?
- Are there items you don't agree with? Is there anything you want more information on?

Optional: If you have a handout that gives local data on mental health:

- What are your reactions to the information presented?
- Are there items you don't agree with or want more information on?

Part 2: Risks, protective factors, and promising strategies (30 minutes)

Take a few minutes to look at page 5 in the *Information Brief* section of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health.* It describes the factors that tend to put young people at risk for mental health conditions, the ones that tend to protect them, and promising strategies for reducing risks and increasing protections. If your discussion group includes young people, consider engaging them in answering the following questions from their perspective.



Understanding the Challenges

- What are your reactions to the information provided in the *Information Brief* about risk factors?
- What are the biggest challenges you are facing related to your mental health? What risk factors affect you the most?
- What do you think are the key assets or protective factors?
- *For the adults in the group:* Do you have questions for the young people in the group that will help you understand the challenges they are facing?

Promising Strategies

- What resources (people, coalitions, agencies, funding, etc.) do you already have in your community?
- What promising strategies are already in place to improve mental health among young people?
- What promising strategies do you know of that promote the mental health of everyone in your community?

Part 3: What are the challenges that keep us from developing a common understanding and consensus on next steps? (30 minutes)

Even the most thoughtful, well-intentioned efforts to improve mental health may fail if we do not identify and address the challenges that stand in our way. An important first step is to have a candid discussion about these differences. Consider the information on pages 11-13 in the *Information Brief* section of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health* for this discussion.

In your group or in your community:

1. Are people willing to talk about emotional and mental health issues? Why or why not?
2. There are many opinions on mental illnesses, their causes, and how we identify and treat these conditions. What are your views?
3. What are your views on how mental health services are being delivered—or how they should be delivered?

As you discover the range of views on mental health within your group and within the community, what is the common ground among people with different ideas?

Part 4: Wrapping up (15 minutes)

- What new insights did you gain from this discussion?
- What themes kept occurring throughout this discussion?
- What ideas for next steps emerged from these insights or themes during the discussion?

Session 3: Exploration of How to Respond

Tips for Facilitators

The session has three parts—you can use the amount of time suggested for each as a guide.

What can we do to support young people?

So far, the *Discussion Guide* has focused on overall issues of mental health—our experiences, our views on why it is important, and our perspectives on what obstacles we face in trying to improve it. This session will begin to sharpen our focus on young people and their families.

Objectives of this session:

- Consider different ways to improve mental health for young people.
- Begin to identify specific areas that we might want to work on locally.

Part 1: What does the research about the mental health of young people tell us? (20 minutes)

Take a look at page 10 in the *Information Brief* section of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health*.

- What are your reactions to the information presented?
- Are there items you don't agree with? Is there anything you want more information on?

Optional: If you have a handout that gives local data on mental health:

- What are your reactions to the information presented?
- Are there items you don't agree with or want more information on?

Part 2: How can we best support the mental health of young people? (50 minutes)

Take a look at the description of evidence-based practices on pages 17-18 in the *Information Brief* section of the *Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health*. Describe how the research can help identify many ways to help our young people. Consider how your community can best help youth and their families.

The list of views below is intended to help the group consider a range of ideas. You may find yourself agreeing with more than one point of view. Some views that are important to you may not be on the list—feel free to combine views or add new ones.



View 1: Reduce negative attitudes and raise awareness about the importance of mental health and wellness

According to this view, we should promote mental health as a key component of overall health and wellness. This will help make it more acceptable to talk about mental health and seek help if needed. We cannot improve the mental health of young people if we do not improve how people view mental health and mental illness, promote acceptance, eliminate misperceptions, and reduce negative attitudes associated with mental illnesses. By making health and wellness an inspiring, positive goal for individuals and communities, we can create an environment that supports the changes we seek.

View 2: Support people in our community in mental health crisis situations

According to this view, we can teach others how to respond to people in crisis and provide responders with the knowledge and skills to address their needs. When family members, loved ones, friends, neighbors, and community members learn how to be helpful when a young person is going through a difficult time, they can help that young person avoid isolation and engage in the solution. The entire community benefits when first responders, schools, health care providers, parents, and peers know how to engage a young person in crisis. This will help provide supports to people who are experiencing these conditions for the first time, help build greater understanding and acceptance in the community, and reduce crisis situations associated with mental illnesses.

View 3: Help young people access local mental health supports and services to meet their needs

According to this view, we can help young people and their families access mental health supports and services when they need them. Many different kinds of groups can be involved: public, private, nonprofit, and faith-based. Multiple youth-serving systems can work together to meet the needs of young people and their families, including schools, law enforcement, child care providers, and others. Efforts between systems need to be coordinated, and families and young people should be engaged in deciding how services are provided. We also need to harness the power of youth and families to help one another by strengthening peer-to-peer and family supports and resources in the community. To support and sustain these efforts, we need to look for ways to take advantage of existing resources in the community.

View 4: Build connections throughout the community

According to this view, implementing multiple strategies will require us to mobilize all the different resources in our community. Other youth-serving systems (juvenile justice, child welfare, early childhood), schools, health care providers, civic groups, individual volunteers, and many other people and organizations can all pitch in. By working together, we will also build the social connections that promote positive mental health. Research shows that the largest risk factor for serious illness is lack of social connectedness. By focusing on this issue, we can strengthen our community and help address health and mental health in many ways.

View 5: Help youth, families, and communities promote mental health and prevent or delay the onset of mental illnesses

According to this view, we must focus efforts on activities that promote mental health and prevent the development of mental illness. We need to focus on interventions designed to prevent or delay the onset of mental illness or substance use disorders. Child development and early life experiences are important, and we can help young children who are at risk of developing mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. We need to look for sustainable ways to support the needs of children and youth through prevention programs, early intervention strategies, and other activities that promote healthy childhood development and create positive learning experiences.

Questions about the views:

1. Which view or views best describes what you think? Why?
2. Why is this view important to you?
3. What other views would you add?
4. What are the tradeoffs between these views and other views?

Part 3: Wrapping up (20 minutes)

- What new insights did you gain from this discussion?
- What themes occurred throughout this discussion?
- What ideas for next steps emerged from these insights or themes during the discussion?

Session 4: Community Solutions



What steps do we want to take as a community?

This session will help you identify community solutions, whether you are part of a small group of concerned citizens or a community-wide planning process. Part 1 is designed to help you brainstorm and prioritize ideas for next steps. Part 2 focuses on identifying individual and community solutions and what communities across the country can do to support local efforts on mental health.

Objectives of this session:

- Decide on next steps.
- Decide how you want to be involved.

Part 1: Brainstorming and prioritizing next steps (40 minutes)

The purpose of this section is to review what you learned in earlier sessions and come up with new ideas to help strengthen mental health in your community. Then you can prioritize the ideas and choose your top ideas to work on.

1. **Identify Ideas:** Spend a few minutes jotting down ideas that will help strengthen mental health in the community. Feel free to include ideas already discussed. Refer to the flip chart paper labeled "Next Steps" from previous sessions.
2. **Prioritize:** Review your list and choose your top two or three ideas to share with the group.
3. **Share:** Go around the circle and have each person share one idea at a time until all the ideas have been shared.

As you decide on our best ideas, it may help to keep the following things in mind. Which ideas:

- Address the issues we've been discussing?
- Will be effective?
- Are feasible?
- Will bring about lasting change?

Tips for Facilitators

- Invite group members to go to the flip chart and put dots or marks by their top two or three ideas.
- Identify the ideas with the most dots or marks.
- Record the top four or five community solutions identified by the group on a fresh piece of flip chart paper.

Questions for discussion:

1. Which ideas seem important or promising?
2. What is a concern you have about each idea?
3. What is something positive about each idea?
4. We have been talking about many ideas to help our community—What is one idea that you are especially interested in working on?
5. What is one thing you could do on your own to help?

Part 2: How can we support local efforts? (30 minutes)

There are many ways that public, private, and nonprofit organizations can support what is happening locally. Communities can work together to identify how existing resources can be leveraged to best support local priorities and to address mental health needs and gaps.

In this section, your group can generate a 50-word statement that captures what you have discussed and what your community can do to improve the mental health of young people.

Community Solutions Snapshot

- Take a few minutes: Write down a few words, phrases, or sentences that might help you create a snapshot of next steps your community can take.

  Consider including the following:

  - What has been done in your community to strengthen mental health?
  - What work still needs to be done?
  - What direction do you plan to take as a community?

- Go around the circle and share what each person wrote.
- Decide together what you want to put into your 50-word statement.

Part 3: Final questions (20 minutes)

1. What has surprised you about these conversations?
2. Have you changed your mind about these issues? If so, how?
3. How will you stay involved to help the young people in your community?
4. What might you do differently after taking part in this process?

Facilitation Tips and Recommendations



A facilitator can help focus and structure the discussion and, at the same time, encourage the participants to take ownership of their group. The facilitator can create a safe environment where each participant feels comfortable expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

The facilitator does not have to "teach" but, instead, is there to guide the process. He or she does not have to be an expert in the subject being discussed.

Here are some other tips to consider:

Be prepared. Make sure you are familiar with the discussion materials, and think ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go.

Set a relaxed and open tone. Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

Help the group establish some ground rules. At the beginning of the session, ask people to suggest how the group should function. Use the sample ground rules, and invite the group to add others or delete some of the ones that are already there. The point is for the group to feel that the rules are their own.

Monitor and assist the group process. Keep track of how the group members are participating—who has and hasn't spoken. Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.

Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond. Avoid speaking after each comment or answering every question, and allow participants to respond directly to each other. When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward nonintervention in the discussion.

In an emergency: If it appears that someone is having difficulty discussing topics such as previous traumatic experiences, mental health issues, or is actually in crisis, you can suggest they call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). This hotline is staffed 24 hours-a-day for those in crisis. ***The crisis line should not be used as a substitute for professional medical services and mental health care consultation. If there is an immediate emergency, call 911***.

Potential Goals for Facilitators

- Be impartial; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.
- Help the group set some guidelines or ground rules and keep to them.
- Help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- Use the discussion materials to bring in points of view that have not been talked about.
- Create opportunities for everyone to participate.
- Focus and help to clarify the discussion.
- Summarize key points in the discussion or ask others to do so.
- Be self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, biases, and values.
- Put the group first.
- Appreciate all kinds of people.

Appendix: Helpful Resources and Websites

(Note: These organizations, materials, and links are offered for informational purposes only and should not be construed as an endorsement of the referenced organization's programs or activities.)

Resources	
• Information About Mental Health	• http://www.MentalHealth.gov
• Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)	• http://www.SAMHSA.gov
• National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)	• http://www.nimh.nih.gov
• Additional information you could use to host a conversation in your community	• http://www.CreatingCommunitySolutions.org
Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Mental Illness	
• Suicide Prevention Resource Center	• http://www.sprc.org
• The Institute of Medicine's *Preventing Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People*: *Progress and Possibilities*	• http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2009/Preventing-Mental-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Disorders-Among-Young-People-Progress-and-Possibilities.aspx
• Addressing Bullying	• http://www.stopbullying.gov
• National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention	• http://www.promoteprevent.org
• Find Youth Info	• http://www.findyouthinfo.gov
• Million Hearts	• http://millionhearts.hhs.gov/index.html
Addressing Public Attitudes	
• Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity, and Social Inclusion	• http://promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov
• Voice Awards	• http://www.samhsa.gov/voiceawards
• Children's Mental Health Awareness Day	• http://www.samhsa.gov/children
Evidence-Based Practices for Treatment	
• National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices	• http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov
• National Center for Trauma-Informed Care	• http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic
• Children's Mental Health Initiative Technical Assistance Center	• http://www.cmhnetwork.org
Recovery Support Services	
• National Consumer Technical Assistance Centers	• http://ncstac.org/index.php
• Homeless Resource Center	• http://www.homeless.samhsa.gov
• Shared Decision Making in Mental Health Tools	• http://162.99.3.211/shared.asp
• College Drinking: Changing the Culture	• http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov

Notes:



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA
www.samhsa.gov • 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727)

SMA-13-4764
July 2013

MentalHealth.gov