

BLUE KNOT FOUNDATION

FACT SHEET: Talking About Trauma with a Family Member (For the General Public)



HOW TO HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH A FAMILY MEMBER YOU KNOW OR SUSPECT MAY EXPERIENCE

INTERPERSONAL TRAUMA

Sometimes being related to a person can make challenging conversations easier, especially if we are feeling protective. At other times disclosing difficult information 'close to home' can make these conversations harder.

There are as many types of families e.g. 'immediate', 'extended', 'family of origin' and 'created' as there are family relationships. Any experience of trauma by a family member especially when it occurs as a result of *abuse within* the family can affect other family members and sometimes, the whole family.

TIPS FOR HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH A FAMILY MEMBER YOU KNOW OR SUSPECT MAY EXPERIENCE INTERPERSONAL TRAUMA

- What is my 'role' relationship to the person? (e.g. mother, partner, sibling etc.)
- Are there any power dynamics that I need to consider?
- How do our personalities and roles affect our relationship?
- How close do I feel to this person and how might that affect our conversation?
This includes the sense of safety and level of comfort.
- How frequently am I in contact with this person? How does this affect having this conversation including if I need to follow up?

Being in regular contact with a family member with whom you have a good relationship, is different to having a significant 'out of the blue' conversation with a family member with whom you lack a good personal connection, in which case the 'role' aspect may dominate.

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- Might I need 'support to offer support'? Can I enlist this support from inside the family? If not, who might I consult? *Note that safety, both physical and emotional, is paramount.*
- 'Choose your moment' where possible if you are initiating the conversation and if you can, avoid a time which is stressful, for either of you.
- Create a safe space, physically and emotionally, including respecting the other person's choices around where and when you hold the conversation to make the conversation as comfortable as possible.
- Approach the person with empathy and concern and avoid judgement.
- Follow trauma-informed principles i.e. *safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment* right through the process.
- Try to reduce any fallout related to family roles e.g. mother - daughter; siblings.
- Use an informal manner and tone so as not to make it too 'heavy'.
- Express concern sensitively and directly e.g. *'I want to ask if you're okay because sometimes I sense that you're very stressed'*.
- Be aware of nonverbal communication – yours and the other person's e.g. facial expression/s and posture.
- Take it slowly providing plenty of opportunity for the other person to speak. Listen carefully, reassure them and don't 'talk over' them.



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- Try and focus on the broad issue/s while steering the conversation away from any distressing detail so that the person does not become overwhelmed.
- Take breaks if either person needs to.
- Listen in a supportive way and explore what the person needs, including any follow-up support. Avoid 'being a counsellor'.
- Be aware of how validating your presence and concern can be.
- Engage in 'quality listening' and be sensitive to non-verbal communication.
- Take a non-judgmental attitude; validate the person.
- Avoid shaming the person for any 'problematic' behaviours they might have adopted to protect themselves.

To read the full paper: Talking About Trauma - Guide to Everyday Conversations for the General Public
<https://www.blueknot.org.au/ABOUT-US/Our-Documents/Publications/Talking-Trauma-Public>

You might also find our other fact sheets in this series helpful as they provide tips around talking about trauma with different people (friends, colleagues, someone you don't know).

For general information please see:

- *Fact Sheet: Talking about Trauma – Having Safe Conversations (For General Public)*
- *Fact Sheet: Talking about Trauma – Applying Trauma-Informed Principles (For General Public)*



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