



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS

## Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is intended to help teens talk about and get support for mental health. Topics include stigma surrounding mental health, how it affects those suffering from mental illness, and what teens can do about it.

Ages

**13-18**

**1**

Session

# Teen Mental Health



# Table of Contents

## Introduction

Talking to Teens About Mental Health.....2  
Getting Help for Teens in Need.....7

## Discussion Session

Session: Talking About Mental Health.....9  
    How to Stop Stigma ..... 13  
    Taking Care of My Mental Health..... 14

# Introduction

# Introduction

Mental health and wellness are just as important as physical health. Mental health is an aspect of an individual's overall wellness that includes thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Since we all experience these things, mental health challenges are not that uncommon. More than one in five teens has had a mental health disorder that impaired their ability to function at home, school or in the community. Some 50% of all mental illness begins by age 14.

Since mental health issues are common among young people, it's important to speak openly and often with teens. Regular conversations about mental health can help teens recognize changes in their thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and let them know when they need to get help. By engaging in discussions about mental health, you can help teens learn ways to manage their emotions and develop good habits for mental wellness.

Talking to youth about mental health may feel strange or uncomfortable at first. You might not know where to start or exactly what to say. You might feel unequipped to answer their questions or know what to ask. The good news is that talking about mental health is easier than you might expect. This guide includes a discussion session you can run with teens, as well as facilitation tips and guidelines for safely facilitating discussions related to mental health.

## Talking to Teens About Mental Health

Asking youth to discuss mental health has the potential to elicit responses that require staff follow-up to ensure the emotional safety of participants. Due to the nature of this material, BGCA strongly recommends the following implementation guidelines and facilitation tips.

### **Review Your Club's Safety Policies**

Before you jump into a conversation about mental health, it is essential to review your Club or Youth Center's safety policies and be prepared to respond and report, should youth disclose past or current abuse, or urgent mental health concerns. For immediate safety and life-threatening mental health concerns, call 911. For concerns about past abuse or ongoing abuse, neglect or endangerment, follow your state's mandated reporting requirements. Make sure to report safety-related incidents according to your organizational policies. If you have questions about using this resource in your Club, or general safety questions, please email [BGCA's safety team](mailto:childsafety@bgca.org) at [childsafety@bgca.org](mailto:childsafety@bgca.org).

**Create a Safe Space To Talk**

Whether you are using a virtual, in-person or hybrid program model, it is important that all youth feel safe and welcome. Take the following steps to create safe, inviting spaces:

1. **Set the Tone:** Use calming, instrumental music or nature sounds when youth enter the program space or when youth are doing an independent activity.
2. **Use Emotional Check-Ins:** Talking about mental health may be personal and emotional for some youth. It is important to create an emotionally safe space for youth to express and process their feelings. Consider using Emotional Check-Ins at the beginning, middle and end of your discussion to gauge how youth are feeling. (See the [Emotional Check-Ins Resource Guide](#) at [BGCA.net/ClubClimate](#).)
3. **Facilitate Group Agreements:** At the start of a mental health discussion, create a set of collaborative Group Agreements to guide the group norms and behaviors during the discussion. Make sure to listen and use supportive language. (See the [Group Agreements Resource Guide](#) at [BGCA.net/ClubClimate](#).)
4. **Listen and Validate:** When you are asking youth to share their feelings, it is important to show that you are listening and let youth know their feelings are valid. It's also important not to tell youth how they should feel or that you know how they feel. Amplify their voices, not yours. Avoid statements like, "You are going to be fine," or "I know how you feel." Instead try, "Your feelings are totally valid," "You're not alone," or "Thank you for sharing such a difficult experience with us."
5. **Use a Co-Facilitator:** Having a second person in the room to respond to youth, clarify directions and provide support during an activity can be helpful and enhance safety.
6. **Provide Sensitive Topic Disclosure:** Talking about mental health may be upsetting for some youth and can lead to a variety of strong emotional reactions. Before your discussion, try saying something like, "This is a safe space where you can express your emotions and ask for help. Today, we are going to talk about some things that may cause you to feel strong emotions. There is no wrong way to feel. You can pass or take a break at any point if you don't feel comfortable. Both (insert co-facilitator's name) and I are here to help. Does anyone have any questions before we start?"

**Know the Warning Signs**

When talking to youth about mental health, it is important to know the warning signs. Warning signs indicate youth may need additional support. Because every teen is different, warning signs aren't the same for everyone. However, there are some common behaviors to watch for. If you notice the following warning signs, address them – and know how to get help.

- Changes in school performance or poor grades despite strong efforts
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Excessive worry or anxiety (e.g., refusing to go to bed or school)
- Hyperactivity
- Persistent nightmares
- Persistent disobedience or aggression
- Frequent temper tantrums or outbursts of anger
- Any substance use
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Excessive complaints of physical ailments
- Changes in the ability to manage responsibilities – at home and/or at school
- Withdrawal from activities they once loved
- Persistent sadness and/or hopelessness
- Defiance of authority
- Truancy, theft and/or vandalism
- Risky sexual activity
- Any discussion of self-harm

For more details about mental health concerns and warning signs, visit **On Our Sleeves** at [onoursleeves.org/find-help/concerns](https://onoursleeves.org/find-help/concerns).

**Respond to Concerns**

Some discussion topics may cause youth to become emotional. They may share information about their own mental health or past traumas. If a teen shares information about personal challenges with mental health, it's important to respond in a supportive, non-judgmental manner. Validate their experiences, feelings and concerns so they feel heard.

What to Say	
Instead of ...	Try ...
"You'll be fine. Just get over it."	"Wow, that sounds really difficult. I'm sorry you're going through that. I'm here for you."
"Just try to be more positive."	"I'm sorry you're feeling down right now. I'm here to listen."
"Why are you crabby all the time?"	"I noticed you don't seem like yourself lately. Is everything okay? I'm here for you."
"You need to go to bed earlier."	"I noticed you're staying up pretty late. Are you having trouble sleeping? What's keeping you up?"
"Why aren't you doing your homework? You need to get your grades up."	"It seems like you're having trouble in school, what's going on? How can I help?"
"Why do you always pick at your food?"	"I noticed you haven't eaten much, how are you feeling?"
"You need to calm down."	"I see that you're upset. Can you tell me more about what's going on?"
"Just look on the bright side."	"Sometimes it must seem like things are stacked against you. We'll get through this together."
"You just need to take some deep breaths."	"What can I do to help you get through that situation if it comes up again?"
"You know, I feel that same way and here's what I do about it."	"I think I understand that you feel _____ when _____ happens, is that right?"



## Handling Youth Disclosure

As a youth development professional, you are not expected to act as a therapist or counselor. You should, however, be able to recognize warning signs that a young person needs additional support and know some places to go for help.

- If a young person discloses **concerns about their own mental health**, thank them for their openness and for sharing with the group, then follow up with them separately to ensure they have the support they need.
- If a young person shares that they have **suicidal thoughts or intentions**, your priority is to keep them safe. For immediate safety and life-threatening mental health concerns, call 911, and contact a parent or caregiver. If the youth is not in immediate danger of suicide, but might benefit from speaking to a trained crisis professional, consider using the Crisis Text Line by texting “Club” to 741-741 and contacting a parent or caregiver.
- If a youth discloses **past or present abuse or neglect**, follow the requirements of your state’s mandated reporting laws and your Club’s safety policies.

You are not alone in supporting Club youth. If your Club has a social worker or therapist on staff, ask them to help during or after the discussion session. If you do not have a mental health professional on staff and need additional guidance, contact your supervisor and create a plan for handling youth disclosures before running the discussion session in this guide.

### Getting Help for Teens in Need

The best way to support a teen is to be proactive. Stay connected to a parent or caregiver and let them know immediately if you have a concern. Use the following websites to help parents and caregivers locate mental health resources:

- **On Our Sleeves:** [onoursleeves.org/find-help/state-resources](https://onoursleeves.org/find-help/state-resources)
- **Mental Health America:** [mhanational.org](https://mhanational.org)
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration:** [samhsa.gov/find-treatment](https://samhsa.gov/find-treatment)

If at any point a young person shares that they have suicidal thoughts or intentions, your only priority is to keep them safe. For immediate safety and life-threatening mental health concerns, call 911 and contact a caregiver.

If the young person is not in immediate danger of suicide, but might benefit from speaking to a trained crisis professional, consider using one of the following suicide prevention hotlines:

- **Crisis Text Line:** National text line dedicated to providing immediate crisis text support with the help of trained crisis counselors.
  - › Text “club” to 741741.
  - › Visit [crisistextline.org](https://crisistextline.org)
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** Provides confidential support to people in crisis and their loved ones.
  - › 1-800-273-8255 (English)
  - › 1-888-628-9454 (Spanish)
  - › 1-800-799-4889 (Deaf or Hard of Hearing)
  - › Visit [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- **Trevor Project:** National hotline and website with chat features provides dedicated crisis support for LGBTQ youth.
  - › 1-866-488-7386
  - › Visit [thetrevorproject.org](https://thetrevorproject.org)



# Discussion Session



**TIME**

60 minutes



**SIZE**

5-25



**HANDOUTS**

Pages 13-14

**Supplies Needed**

- Whiteboard or flip-chart paper
- Dry erase markers or permanent markers
- Post-it Notes
- Pens or pencils

**Link to Resources**

Creating Group Agreements:  
[BGCA.net/ClubClimate](https://www.bgca.net/ClubClimate)

**Social-Emotional Skills**

- Self-Awareness
- Perspective-Taking
- Communication

**Key Term**

**Mental health:** Psychological and emotional wellness

# Session: Talking About Mental Health

**Session Objective:** Teens will be able to explain the stigma surrounding mental health and how it impacts those with mental illness.

**1**

**Warm Welcome (2 minutes)**

**Greet** youth by name as they enter your program area. **Engage** in meaningful conversation.

**For virtual facilitation**

- **Greet** attendees warmly as the session starts or the video begins.
- **Ask** youth to greet each other in the chat box.
- **Consider** playing music through your computer as another way to welcome youth into the virtual space.

**2**

**Emotional Check-In (5 minutes)**

- **Ask**, “If your mood were food, what food would it be? For example, if you’re angry, your mood could be hot Cheetos. If you’re happy, your mood could be cake.”
- **Give** everyone a chance to think, then have everyone share with the group.
- **Let** participants elaborate on their feelings or pass if they prefer not to answer.

**Facilitator’s Note:** This Emotional Check-In can be easily adapted using animals, colors or types of weather.

**3**

**Group Agreements Review (5 minutes)**

- **Reference** your teens’ Group Agreements and remind youth of their commitment to one another.
- **Ask**, “Does everyone commit to our Agreements today?”
- **Ask**, “Is there anything we need to add?”

**Facilitator’s Note:** If you do not have a set of Group Agreements for your teens, use the session in the **Group Agreements guide** available at [BGCA.net/ClubClimate](https://www.bgca.net/ClubClimate).

## Session 1

Ages 13-18

9

**Sensitive Topic Disclosure**

**Say**, “This is a safe space where you can express your emotions and ask for help. Today, we are going to talk about mental health. Talking about mental health may cause you to feel some strong emotions. There is no wrong way to feel. You can pass or take a break at any point if you don’t feel comfortable discussing the questions/topics. Both (insert co-facilitator’s name) and I are here to help. Does anyone have any questions before we start?”

**4****Main Activity: Discussion (35 minutes)****Step 1:** Break into small groups.

- **Divide** youth into small groups of three to four.
- **Provide** each group with a stack of Post-it Notes and something to write with.
- **Write** the words “Mental Health” on a whiteboard or flip-chart paper for everyone to see.
- **Ask**, “What words come to mind when you hear mental health?”
- **Tell** youth that there are no right or wrong answers.
- **Challenge** each group to write down as many answers as they can by writing one answer on each Post-it Note.
- **Allow** groups to work for five minutes.
- **Ask** groups to place their Post-it Note answers around the word “Mental Health.”
- **Review** the words with the group.

**Step 2:** Lead a discussion.

- **What do you notice about the words we came up with?**
  - › There may be a combination of both positive and negative words shared.
  - › Allow youth to discuss the themes they notice from the list they created.
  - › Have participants group the notes into categories or themes.
- **How does that make you feel?**
  - › This will depend on the themes they notice. If they notice many of the words shared have a negative connotation, they might feel sad. Or if many of the words have a positive tone, they might feel hopeful or supported.
- **In your own words, what is mental health?**
  - › Mental health and wellness are just as important to all of us as our physical health. Mental health is simply a component of your overall wellness that is focused on your thoughts, feelings and actions.

**Session 1**

Ages 13-18

**10**

- **Why might youth or teens discuss mental health?**
  - › More than one in five young people experience significant mental health concerns, and 50% of all mental illnesses start by age 14.
  - › There is a stigma around mental health that prevents people from getting help.
- **Why might someone look at mental health issues in a negative way?**
  - › In our culture, there is a stigma associated with mental health. The dictionary defines “stigma” as “a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person.”
  - › That means it’s common for people to have an immediate negative reaction to a person with a mental health condition. People may even react negatively to the family and close friends of this person.
  - › This stigma can make us feel uncomfortable discussing the subject, sharing about our own mental health or talking with a friend who shares about their mental health.
  - › When a person with a mental health issue shares their concerns, and others react with discomfort or negativity, they feel the effects of this stigma.
- **What are the consequences of stigma?**
  - › Stigma stops people from sharing mental health concerns and can prevent them from getting help when they need it.
  - › They may also not ask for support from friends and family, which is an important part of treatment.
  - › The consequences of stigma can seep into other parts of our lives. People can lose friends, miss out on jobs or not make teams.
- **How can we stop stigma?**
  - › One way to reduce stigma is to talk about mental health openly and often. The more we normalize discussions around mental health, the less taboo they become.
  - › If you show that you are open to these discussions, people will feel supported and are more likely to share with you.

**Facilitator’s Note:** Print the handout “How to Stop Stigma” (page 13) and ask teens to sign the pledge.

## Session 1

Ages 13-18

# 11

- **Why might it be important to take care of your mental health?**
  - › Mental health is just as important as physical health.
  - › Not taking care of your mental health can lead to problems like poor grades, trouble sleeping/eating and relationship issues later in life.
- **What are some things you can do to take care of your mental health?**
  - › This will look different for everyone. Help the group generate a list of ways they take care of their minds and bodies.
  - › Examples could include things like getting enough sleep, spending time with loved ones, exercising, talking to someone you trust, and doing activities you love.
  - › Recommended: See the [Emotional Wellness Teen Expansion Pack](#) (available on the Program page of BGCA.net) for more ways you can support teens' emotional wellness.
- **Who are some people you can turn to for help?**
  - › Everyone's network of "helpers" may look different. Help the group generate a list of people they can talk to who will support them.

**Facilitator's Note:** Use the handout on page 14 to help teens make a plan to care for their mental health.

## 5 Reflection (5 minutes)

**Ask** the following questions or generate your own to help youth reflect on the session:

- What? – What surprised you today as you talked about mental health?
- So What? – Why is it important to think about mental health?
- Now What? – How will you use today's conversation to help you think and speak more openly about mental health?

## 6 Recognition (5 minutes)

**Ask** youth to recognize at least one other participant who contributed to the conversation in a way they appreciated.

## 7 Closing and Transition (2 minutes)

- **Ask** youth to clean up the space and be sure to put all the materials in designated spaces.
- **Provide** youth with clear instructions for the transition to their next program area or activity.
- **Check in** with anyone who seems upset – sad, mad, scared or worried -- and offer support using the guidance in the Introduction.

# Session 1

Ages 13-18

# 12



We, the teens of \_\_\_\_\_, are committed to fighting the stigma of mental health in our community.

We are committed to creating an environment in our Club/Youth Center that makes youth feel:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

In order to accomplish this, we will take the following action steps:

- |          |                    |
|----------|--------------------|
| 1. _____ | Date: _____        |
| _____    | Responsible: _____ |
| 2. _____ | Date: _____        |
| _____    | Responsible: _____ |
| 3. _____ | Date: _____        |
| _____    | Responsible: _____ |



**Taking Care of My Mental Health**

**Things that are good for my PHYSICAL HEALTH:**

**Things that are good for my MENTAL HEALTH:**

**Things that are good for my EMOTIONAL HEALTH:**

**People I can talk to:**

**When I feel down I can ...**





## Health and Wellness

Programs in this Core Program Area focus on building the physical, social and emotional wellness of youth. These programs provide opportunities to build the foundational skills of developing relationships, regulating emotions and solving problems. These programs also focus on health promotion skills, such as communication and decision making, through exploring a range of health topics and behaviors, including substance use, sexual behavior and violence. Targeted Programs and High-Yield Activities in this area are linked to the Healthy Lifestyles priority outcome area.

# ON OUR SLEEVES™

The Movement for  
Children's Mental Health

Powered by the experts at Nationwide Children's Hospital.  
To learn more, visit [OnOurSleeves.org](https://OnOurSleeves.org).

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## GREAT FUTURES START HERE.



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**HEALTH AND  
WELLNESS**