

How to talk to patients about mental health

Ask open-ended questions

- “How are you managing to free yourself up to attend therapy appointments?”
- “I’m curious, what seems to be getting in the way of [xyz]?”

Use reflective listening

- “You’re really not sure if your new therapist can be helpful.”

Reinforce action, changes, and strengths

- “With all the obstacles that you’ve described, it’s impressive that you’ve been able to make your therapy appointments. This really speaks to your commitment to yourself and to being the best mom you can.”
- “It was difficult, and you still were able to make it to your visit today. That didn’t just magically happen, you had to take specific, concrete action to get to where you are right now.”

Normalize concerns

- “It is common to feel concerned about how getting help for depression will affect your life.”
- “Based on everything you’re going through, it would be odd for you *not* to feel overwhelmed.”

Summarize the conversation

- “So, based on what you’ve described, it sounds like you’re concerned about your depression because it affects your relationship with your baby and your partner. You also said that you must put in a lot of effort to attend therapy appointments and it costs money to get there, which makes you doubt the process. Do I have that right?”

Ask permission before providing advice/feedback and follow-up

- “Would it be ok if we talk about your depression?”
- “I have some thoughts about strategies to address this, would you be interested in hearing them?”
- “What’s it like for you hearing this feedback?”
- “What questions do you have for me?”

Avoid saying “I understand”

- Say instead, “I can’t imagine what you’re going through” or “that must be very difficult.” Sometimes patients are looking for simple validation, rather than a solution.

Avoid using the word “but” because it negates what came before it

- Avoid saying something like, “You’re working really hard, but you still feel overwhelmed.” Instead, use the word “and” to acknowledge both truths: “You’re working really hard, and it’s important to keep focusing on your mental health and self-care. You’ve already made progress by being here.”

Avoid talking about yourself and your personal challenges or situations

- No matter how well-intentioned or seemingly appropriate, patients often perceive this as you not hearing them.