



Opening the Door

Starting difficult conversations with your mental health service provider

It can be hard to talk to others about difficult or sensitive issues. Sometimes the hardest part is figuring out how to start. This document offers some ways to start conversations about three topics:

1. Partnering and decision making;
2. Medications; and
3. Respect.

The conversation-starters listed below can help you take control of the situation, allow you to be heard, and open up a conversation about topics that are important to you.

It can be helpful to use a general opening statement that sets the stage. For example, you could say,

This is difficult for me to talk about, but I feel it is important to discuss _____.

Examples of How to Start a Conversation about Partnering and Decision Making

Part of my recovery is working toward things that matter to me. The goals in my treatment plan do not fully match what is most important to me. I'd like to talk about how to change the plan so I can get or keep what is important to me in my life.

I want to be able to do the things that give my life meaning and pleasure now, not just in the future. For me, some of these things are _____ (for example, having friends, playing music, sexual intimacy, spending time with animals, finding work I like to do, being with my family, and so forth).

I want to be more involved in making decisions about my life. I want you to listen to my point of view and respect how I feel. I want you to help me understand and think about things so I can make better decisions.

I can make good decisions about my life. I want your help in thinking about my options, but I want to be the one who makes the final decisions.

I want to change my doctor (or other provider). I feel we do not communicate very well and it is not helping me in my recovery. Can you help me find a different doctor (or other provider?)

TIP

- You do not have to use these EXACT words.
- Say what is going right as well as presenting your concerns or issues.
- To help you remember what you want to say, write it down. Or print this page. Take your notes with you to the appointment.
- Practice what you want to say before meeting with the provider.
- Ask someone you trust to join the meeting with you. This can give you more confidence. Another person also provides another set of ears for listening and remembering what is said.
- Tape recording a meeting can be useful because you can listen again to what is said.
- Sometimes it takes several meetings to come to fully talk things through.
- Write down any agreements.

Examples of How to Start a Conversation about Medications

I want to fully understand what medications I am taking and why. I want you to tell me about their benefits, risks, and side effects.

I am not happy with the medication I am using. I want to talk to you about options for other medications. I am experiencing some medication side effects that are bothering me. (Say what side effects are bothering you most, such as sleepiness, weight gain, movement problems, dry mouth, not able to think, and so forth.)

I know you want me to take medications, but I want to also explore some non-drug approaches to feeling better and dealing with my problems. What are some of the things people do to feel better without using lots of medications?

You have suggested I take these medications, but I want more information on options before I decide. I want to understand the benefits, risks, and side effects of the new medication. Why do you think it might be useful for me? How is it better than the medication I am using now?

I have been taking the medications you recommended, but I do not like what they do to my body or how they make me feel. I want to take a break. I want to talk with you about my options.

I keep hearing that there are serious, life-shortening side effects of antipsychotic medications. This worries me. I want to talk about how the medications I am using might affect me in the future. I want to know how to prevent these serious side effects. I want to know about treatment options that may have less risk for me.

It is important to me to be able to have sexual relations with my partner. I am having trouble in this area. I want to know how the medications I'm using affect my ability to have sex. I want to know what other options there might be.

Examples of How to Start a Conversation about Respect

I want to talk about how we can improve our communication. I know you are very busy. But sometimes I feel you are rushed and impatient with me. I do not think you always listen to what I say.

I would like to talk about ways we can have a more respectful relationship – especially when we disagree about something. There are times when we see things differently. Sometimes I feel that my point of view does not matter.

You make some good suggestions. But sometimes it sounds like I have no choice. It would be helpful if we could always talk about more than one option. I want to be a partner in making decisions about my treatment and not feel like I am just being told what to do.

Notes: Write your ideas for starting a difficult conversation here.
