



## Suwannee's HEART

***Helping Everyone Achieve  
Resilience and Thrive***

How are your kids doing? How are you doing?

***Be honest.***

If you or your child are struggling, you are not alone. The world is a very different place than it was a year ago, or even just a few months ago. There is no shame in struggling with mental health issues. These challenges can be overwhelming but are not uncommon, insurmountable, or permanent.

As a parent or guardian, you can support your child by encouraging them to talk about how they feel and by reassuring them that they are not alone. One of the most worrying feelings related to mental health struggles is that the negative or destructive feelings will never end. It is important for children to know that they don't have to figure things out by themselves. There are some practical things that we can do to help our kids understand that anxiety, sadness and other overwhelming, uncomfortable feelings can be temporary and short lived.

***Keep an open line of communication.*** Create an environment of open communication and connection by being interested in your young person's life, giving them your time and attention, and doing your best to be responsive to their needs. Your child or teenager is much more likely to be open to talking about their feelings if they feel close to you on a daily basis.

***Pick the right time.*** Talk to your child or teen when they are calm, relaxed, and feeling safe. The conversation will probably go much better than if you try to talk to them when they are already agitated, feeling overcome with emotion, or worked up. This doesn't have to be a designated, scripted time. Grab a minute while you're in the car together, doing chores at home, or any other time the opportunity presents itself.

***Listen and validate.*** Ask open ended questions rather than questions with yes/no answers to encourage conversation. Validate your child's feelings – even if you don't understand or necessarily agree with what they are saying. An easy way to do this is to respond with phrases like "I hear you," or "tell me more about that." This helps them feel understood and accepted, and much more likely to open up and talk about what is going on in their lives.

***Don't judge.*** Adolescence is a time where your child begins to develop their independence and individuality. They also begin to establish their own beliefs, which may no longer fit with yours. Let's be real. This can be difficult for parents to navigate. Try to be open and understanding of your teen's viewpoint – even if you don't agree with it. If your child feels judged, criticized, or rejected, it will be much more difficult for them to speak honestly and openly to you the next time.

***Don't try to fix everything.*** Even though it's difficult to see your child struggling or upset, it's important for them to learn how to work through their emotions and self regulate. Many young people experience intense, overwhelming emotions. They may also have reactions to situations or events that seem exaggerated or out of proportion. Allowing them the chance to express these feelings without telling them they are overreacting, or trying to "fix" or "solve" things can give them the space to process their feelings and move on – and may also make them more likely to seek you out the next time they need to talk.

***Teach your child to have an attitude of gratitude.*** When we consciously choose to be thankful and practice gratitude, we are training our brains to recognize and seek positive thoughts and emotions. Talk with your young person about recognizing the good in small things and to look for something to be grateful for in every little part of their day. Sometimes this can be as basic as being thankful for a place to sleep or knowing someone cares about you. When gratitude becomes a habit, it has enormous power to increase resilience and mental and emotional wellbeing.

***Take care of yourself.*** Caring for yourself is vital when you are supporting struggling kids. It's all too easy to take your child's bad moods, tears, or frustration personally when you are running on empty yourself. It's very important to practice self care, whatever this look like for you. You are then able to offer support and assistance to your child. In other words, look after your own mental health, because it's impossible to pour from an empty cup.

So there you have it! If thinking about incorporating all of these things seems overwhelming, just pick one or two to get started. Anything we do to create a better relationship with our kids creates positive results and does immeasurable good for both our children and ourselves. As always, let me remind you that we are all in this together. Contact your child's school counselor or me if your child is struggling with mental health issues. We're here to help.

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