

5 steps to a conversation about mental health

Talking to a colleague about their mental health may seem daunting, but it's important to speak up. Whether you suspect they are suffering from work stress or are showing signs of depression or other serious mental health issues, you need to start the conversation.



1 Prepare

- Find a time and space where you both feel comfortable—perhaps somewhere offsite like a park or café.
- Make sure you've set aside plenty of time to talk and you or the person have no other commitment to rush off to.
- Make sure there are no interruptions. Turn off your mobile phones.
- Have information about your company's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and bring the Wellbeing on Tap *Where to get help* resource.

2 Talk

- Remember that no special skills are required to talk about mental health. You just need to be empathetic, approachable, and willing to listen.
- Try and appear relaxed. Think about your body language, sit comfortably and maintain eye contact.
- If the person doesn't start the conversation about how they are feeling, help them by asking an open-ended question:
"We haven't talked in a while—I wanted to see how you're doing?"
- Don't ask confrontational questions, such as: "What's wrong with you at the moment?"
- There may be pauses or silences in the conversation. Be patient and give the person time to answer.
- If the person doesn't want to talk, stay relaxed and try and arrange another time to catch up.

3 Listen & show understanding

- It is important to show the person you are listening, you care about them and you won't judge them.
- Ask questions that show you really want to understand what's going on and how you can help them. For example: "Have you talked to anyone else about this?" or "What can I do to help you with this?"
- Give the person time to talk and reflect back what they are saying to make sure you have understood them correctly.
- Use minimal prompts such as "I see" and "Ah" to keep the conversation going.
- Don't label the person, for example by saying, "You seem depressed" unless they use that language themselves.

4 Support

- After you have listened and understood their issues, you can begin to discuss possible courses of action.
- Encourage them to come up with their own ideas on things that may help, such as talking to a trusted friend or visiting their GP. Let them know they can always talk to you if they need to.
- Look at the practical support your company can provide, such as changes in work hours, extended leave, or changes in duties.
- It is important to work together to find solutions that work for both of you.
- Thank the person for opening up to you.
- Arrange a time to check back in with them.

5 Take care

- Each person's situation and needs are unique and the conversation may not go as expected.
- Remember you have helped just by listening and opening up the conversation. If the person doesn't want to talk, respect their choice and let them know you are always there for them.
- Look after yourself. You may need to debrief or relax if the conversation has been concerning. Talk to someone for support and/or advice but remember to respect the person's privacy.
- If the person says they are feeling suicidal, you need to act. Contact your company's EAP immediately or phone Lifeline on 0800 543 354.

This is a summary guide only. It is intended to assist with finding the right care for the person and to help them feel supported. It is not conclusive advice. It should be considered alongside individual workplace policies and procedures and, of course, medical and specialist services.