

WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

A Conversation Guide for Managers



Perhaps more than any other group in an organization, managers are key to creating a supportive and psychologically safe workplace culture. You are “first responders” to employee mental health challenges—often in the best position to know how your team members are feeling and when employees need support.

That’s why managers are encouraged to check in regularly with your teams about their mental health and remind them about the benefits and support services your company offers.

TIPS FOR A CONVERSATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

There's growing awareness of the importance of mental wellness, and a growing comfort in people talking about their mental health. Just like it's normal to say when you're feeling under the weather, it should feel completely normal to say you're experiencing mental health challenges.

Having open conversations about mental health is one of the most beneficial things that managers can do to show their support and encourage colleagues to seek help. It's important that you create a safe environment where your team members feel comfortable sharing and asking for what they need.

Here are three steps to help you lead a conversation about mental health with your team members.

STEP 1: Prepare for the conversation.

- **Know the symptoms.** It's important that you're able to recognize warning signs of stress, burnout or mental distress in your team members. Use these behavior changes as a cue to check in and start a conversation about addressing workplace stressors.
 - Signs of fatigue or exhaustion
 - Lack of focus, concentration, or motivation
 - Loss of appetite or sudden changes in weight
 - Irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Reduced productivity or increased mistakes on the job
 - Breakdown of routines or workplace systems

IMPORTANT NOTE: Warning signs that point to urgent mental distress—including talk of **suicide**, warning signs of **alcohol or drug misuse**, signs of **disordered eating** or signs of **domestic abuse**—may signal the need for a more serious intervention and should be reported immediately to Human Resources.

- **Understand your role.** Employees who are experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis may require professional support outside of your professional training. Your role in these situations is to connect employees to support services and help make it easier for workers to access the care they need—for example, by providing flexible scheduling or time off for therapy or counseling, offering mental health days and managing workload to facilitate work-life balance.
- **Consider the appropriate environment.** A general wellness check may be appropriate in a team huddle or in a casual one-on-one meeting. For a more direct intervention, consider how to set up a private discussion that feels comfortable and safe. Avoid times or environments that might trigger alarm—for example, consider that setting up meetings at 4pm on Friday are often thought of as a red flag for termination. **Morning hours** are considered best for engaging in difficult conversations.
- **Prepare company benefits and support options.** Brush up on the benefits and services your company offers to support mental wellbeing. If needed, explore whether additional community or national services are available to recommend. If there are specific organizational solutions you want to suggest, consider if you need to clear these with Human Resources or leadership in advance.

STEP 2: Start the Conversation.

- **Share observations with care and concern.** If you notice that someone's behavior has changed, it may be a good time to start a conversation. Point out that you've noticed a change in their behavior and convey your concerns.

Examples:

- "I noticed you are not speaking up in meetings as much as you used to. You also seem to be spending more breaks alone. Is everything okay?"
- "You seem irritated with your colleagues lately. Is everything okay?"
- "I noticed that you seem anxious lately. Is there anything I can do to help?"
- "I'm concerned about you and wanted to check in."

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions give employees a chance to add detail and context to their experiences.

Examples:

- "I see that you are under a lot of pressure with this project. What are you doing to cope with stress and how can I help?"
- "I noticed that you are under a lot of stress at work. What can I do to support you?"
- "You appear to be upset about something. Are you comfortable telling me about what you are going through?"

- **Listen more than you speak.** Even in a workplace that has reduced stigma, it takes courage to talk about one's mental health. As a leader, you can make employees feel safe discussing their mental health through active listening, giving them space, acknowledging their perspective and trying to understand where they are coming from. Resisting the urge to break an uncomfortable silence can also help your employee to open up.

Examples:

- "I hear that you're feeling like..."
- "Wow, it really sounds like you're going through a lot. Tell me more about how you're taking care of yourself."
- "What can I do to make it easier for you to seek support?"

- **Lead with empathy.** Empathy, the ability to consider the position of the other person, can make a powerful impact when discussing mental health. Speak

from a place of sincerity and compassion in order to help make it easier for employees to seek support. Validate and hold space for difficult emotions—don't brush over them. While the desire to help someone feel better is normal, jumping to false optimism can be counterproductive and keep an employee from seeking help. Validating the other person's outlook doesn't necessarily mean that you agree but communicates that you see where they are coming from.

Examples:

- “I want you to know that I care.”
 - “I can understand how you would see things that way.”
 - “This must be difficult for you. What can I do to best support you?”
- **Affirm and empower your team members.** Alleviate concerns that an employee will be evaluated negatively on their work performance if they seek therapy or ask for other accommodations for a mental health issue. Acknowledge the courage, strength and perseverance it takes to talk about mental health and to ask for help.

Examples:

- “Thank you for trusting me enough to share this with me.”
 - “I admire the bravery it took for you to have this conversation today.”
 - “You are right to prioritize your mental health. I want you to know this isn't going to affect how I view your work. I am here to support you to be your best self.”
- **Discuss next steps whenever an employee reaches out for support.** This includes collaborating on a plan for getting help, like making an appointment with a psychiatrist or therapist, attending a support group or finding assistance through your company's EAP. Finish the conversation with agreement on what each individual will do next. If you believe there is cause to be concerned about the employee's personal safety or that of others, consult with Human Resources immediately.

Recognize that your job as a manager is to help eliminate work-related stressors. This could include a more flexible work arrangement, a temporary redistribution of responsibilities or additional support through mentorship or peer support programs. Organize notes from your discussion in a way that facilitates future reference, and, if appropriate, share the notes with Human Resources.

Examples:

- “Now that you’ve shared your concern with me, what can I do to support you?”
- “What is your plan for support after you leave my office today?”
- “Is there anyone I can call or reach out to for you for extra support?”

STEP 3: Keep the Conversation Going.

- **Make a plan for ongoing check-ins.** Collaborate with your employee on a plan for ongoing support. This could be as simple as a routine check-in during weekly meetings. Use ongoing conversations as an opportunity to evaluate whether the solutions or resources you offered to an employee are working or if a new strategy should be considered.
- **Have an open-door policy.** Remind employees that it’s okay to knock on your door or arrange a Zoom chat when they need support.
- **Normalize mental health in everyday conversations.** Use these discussion starters during team meetings or other group settings to encourage workplace discussions about mental health.

Examples:

- “I was wondering if we could have a discussion about how everyone is feeling lately? Is there any information, resources or support that you need, or do you have any questions you’d like answered?”
- “Our team is going through an especially busy period. Is anyone feeling stressed, anxious, or having a difficult time concentrating? Is there anything I can do to help you prioritize or make things easier at work?”

LANGUAGE DO'S & DON'TS

Try these simple tips for talking about mental health.

DO SAY

- "Thank you for opening up to me."
- "How are you feeling today?"
- "Is there anything I can do to help?"
- "Thank you for sharing."
- "I'm sorry to hear that. It must be tough."
- "I'm here for you when you need me."
- "What support can I offer?"
- "Can I help you navigate our mental health benefits?"
- "Can I help you make an appointment with a counselor in our EAP?"
- "Can I help you connect with a local community organization that can address your situation?"
- "Can I help connect you with an Employee Resource Group or trained mental health ambassador in our company?"
- "I'm here for you."

DON'T SAY

- "It could be worse."
- "Just deal with it."
- "Snap out of it."
- "Everyone feels that way sometimes."
- "You may have brought this on yourself."
- "We've all been there."
- "You've got to pull yourself together."
- "I'm sure it'll just blow over."
- "Maybe try thinking happier thoughts."

Source: Adapted from [MakeltOK.org](https://www.makeltok.org)

NEED ADDITIONAL HELP?

There are many workplace mental health training and certification programs available for managers, and even some that provide custom coaching for specific industries with unique mental health needs. If you'd like additional training on workplace mental health, contact your Human Resources Department or consider this [Workplace Mental Health Ally Certification Program](#).

SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES IN CRISIS

The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** offers 24-hour, toll-free, confidential support for people in distress.

Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text TALK to 741741

Spanish: 1-888-628-9454

TTY: 1-800-799-4889

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

The **SAMHSA National Helpline** is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

TTY: 1-800-487-4889

[Online Treatment Locator](#)

ADDITIONAL TOOLS & RESOURCES FOR MANAGERS

- [Workplace Mental Health Playbook](#)
- [Roadmap to Addressing Mental Health in the Workplace: For Managers](#)
- [The Mental Health Matrix™](#)
- [Inclusive Language Guidelines](#)
- [Mental Health Support Resources](#)
- [Psych Hub: Mental Health Ally Training](#)

HEALTH ACTION ALLIANCE ORGANIZING PARTNERS

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