

Section 4

Having Constructive Conversations to Support Employee Mental Health in the Context of COVID-19



Many people living with a mental illness have a similar anecdote: they often say, once they are feeling much better, that their recovery began when someone took an interest in them, showed that they cared, and took the time to be an ear for them when they felt very low or alone. You have the chance to be that person. (Resource: [Men's Health](#)).

The COVID-19 crisis has meant that many employees are facing difficulties both inside and outside work, and so they may benefit enormously from simple and supportive conversations with managers and colleagues who can help them if they feel anxious or depressed.

Here are some ideas that might help you have such conversations and lend a hand to help your colleague to thrive again.

Overcoming the Fear of Discussing Mental Health

You don't need to be an expert to talk to someone who isn't coping so well. With proper mental health resources, you should be reassured you will not make things worse. While you may feel uncomfortable talking to someone about your concerns regarding their mental health, simply letting them know you care can make a difference to how they are feeling and may pave the way to create an open dialogue.

By talking and listening, you can create an opportunity to encourage someone to seek help if needed. Everyone experiences mental health issues at some time in their lives, and it is vital not to underestimate the importance of just being there for someone. Many managers will be hesitant to begin a conversation out of fear of:

- causing offense or making things worse
- harming their working relationship
- not wanting to get involved
- not being sure how to respond

If you're concerned about someone, approach them and start a conversation. Try to understand their situation and encourage them to seek support. Helping the person find further information and support services can also be really useful, as this step can often be overwhelming for someone with anxiety or depression.

Remind yourself that this is no different to talking about how someone's feeling – the topic is just a bit more delicate. Remember you may be the only person to have noticed changes in their behavior or have the courage to start a conversation. This may be vital for them to get the help and support they need to stay well.

Planning a Conversation

When you're preparing to approach someone, it can be helpful to:

- Find out what help is available within your workplace. If you work in a larger organization, does it have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or an Occupational Health Service?
- Find out what other support services are available (counselling, peer support groups, charity partners)
- Consider who should be having the conversation. Are you the best person or would another workmate or someone from HR be more suitable?
- Think about the most appropriate time and place. Choose a moment when the person will feel comfortable and be free of distractions.

If possible, set aside enough time to talk in detail. Give yourself a buffer between this conversation and the next. Ending a helpful conversation too early can appear aloof and send the message that your colleagues concerns are not really a priority.

Beginning the Conversation

Whether you are a manager concerned about someone in your team or speaking to a peer, the following tips will help you start the conversation. Don't worry if you don't quite know what to say. Just by being supportive and listening, you're helping to make a difference:

- There's no, single correct way of expressing thoughts – your key role is to be thoughtful and genuine.
- You don't need to have all the answers – it's about having the conversation and the support you offer by talking.
- Say what feels comfortable for you.
- If what you say doesn't sound quite right, stop and try again. It doesn't have to be the end of the conversation.



Begin the conversation by telling them that you have noticed that they don't seem their usual self and describe the changes you've noticed in their mood or behavior. Tell them you are worried about them and ask about what is bothering them. Some phrases that might help you get started:

- You don't seem yourself lately, would it help to tell me what's going on?
- Tell me about how you are managing during these strange times?
- I've noticed you have been quiet lately, is there anything you'd like to talk about?

While having a conversation, let the other person know they are not alone, and there is hope that things can get better. Be patient and understanding. It is important to remember that setbacks will occur. Help them overcome any setbacks and ask questions such as: What can I do to support you with this?

Check-in with them frequently to see how they are going. This shows that you care about them and provides an opportunity to talk. Point out any improvements you notice and encourage them to continue to speak with you about anything that may be worrying them.

Remember, supporting someone else can sometimes be draining on your own mental health and well-being. It is important to look after yourself by making sure you are getting enough sleep and take time out for yourself or seeking help from others when you need it.

Asking Questions to Keep the Conversation Going

A core communication skill is asking ‘open’ rather than ‘closed’ questions. Open questions are ones which encourage the person to respond freely with their thoughts and feelings. Closed questions classically produce a one-word answer, such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or a fact – ‘yesterday’ or ‘seven’. Remember that:

- Questions beginning with ‘are’ or ‘do’ tend to be closed questions because they generate just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers.
- Questions which begin with ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘which’, ‘who’, and ‘when’ are open questions. These will generate fuller answers which allow you to follow up.
- If you get the chance to probe deeper, then you could try additional questions beginning with ‘how’, ‘why’, and ‘in what way’.

For example, ‘Are you feeling better today?’ is a closed question. The colleague doesn’t have to answer anything more than ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Or they might just answer with a grunt or a shrug of the shoulders. All you have to do is change the question slightly. Turn it into ‘How are you feeling today?’ and the colleague has the opportunity to describe how they feel. Open questions, therefore, are much better at providing information. Open questions are an avenue leading somewhere; closed questions are a dead end.



What to Do if Your Colleague is Reluctant to Share How they Feel

Some people are not ready, do not know how, or may not want to speak to someone about how they are feeling. Remember, however, that the longer someone delays getting the help they need, the more distressed they are likely to become, putting them in a much harder place to recover from. While this is very worrying for people close to them, it doesn’t help to pressure them to talk if they are not ready; the decision to speak about their feelings needs to come from within. So, what can you do?

- Focus on spending time with them so that they don’t feel alone. It can take time for someone to feel comfortable enough to talk about how they are feeling.
- Let them know that you are concerned about them and are there if they want to talk. Reassure them with phrases such as, “call me if you ever want to talk” or “I am here for you if you decide it would be helpful to talk.”
- Ask them if there are any specific reasons why they don’t want to seek help. Once you have an idea about what is worrying them, you may be able to work together to find a solution.
- Suggest, when they are ready, that they can speak to someone else they trust or contact a support line if they would feel more comfortable speaking to someone they don’t know.
- Offer to organize access to a mental health professional or other support service.
- Some people may find it hard to talk to a mental health professional or other support service because they feel anxious, frightened that others are against them, or fearful of criticism. Explain to them that a professional support service is there to help and will not judge them.
- Some people are reluctant to seek help from a mental health professional or support service because they have difficulty putting their thoughts together to explain what is going on, find it hard to talk about how they feel, or don’t realize that they need help. In this instance, you can support them by speaking to a doctor or a support service beforehand, or writing notes about your concerns in advance that you can use during the conversation.

Remember, you don’t need to have all the answers or to deal with the situation on your own. There are many others in your organization who can provide advice and support.

The Importance of 'Active' Listening

Sometimes the conversation you have with a colleague will be the first time they have talked about their mental health with someone else. It's important to carefully listen to what they say and to do so in a way where they feel confident and heard sympathetically without judgement. Remind yourself about why being listened to during a difficult time can help your colleague feel better:

- They feel understood.
- They feel cared about and accepted.
- It helps to make sense of things that are happening or have happened to them.
- It connects them with someone else when they're probably feeling very isolated and unsupported.
- It helps your colleague trust you so that they can:
 - a. tell you about what's going on for them.
 - b. learn from you.
 - c. participate in agreeing some actions and support to help them through the crisis.
- It helps them release tension in a safe way.

It's also important to listen carefully without judging them:

- Remember that this is their story, so don't try to guess how it plays out. Instead, listen and ask questions.
- Be aware of your body language. To show you're listening, try to maintain eye contact and sit in a relaxed position.
- Repeat back your understanding of what they've said and make sure it's accurate.

Responding to What They Say

Think about the best way to respond to what your colleague is saying. You can't always fix things, but you can help them along the way. For example, you might:

- Decide that today you're just there to listen and offer support.
- Talk about it again another time if they seem reluctant or upset.
- Keep checking in with them.
- Reassure them that you'll respect their privacy.
- Think about what they need now and ask what you can do to help.





Agreeing on Next Steps

Ideally, at the end of each conversation about mental health problems you can summarize one or two things you have agreed to do when you speak next. For example, you might:

- Discuss options for further support.
- Finish the conversation with agreement on what you are both going to do next before the next conversation.
- Appreciate that they opened up and shared their story with you.
- Make a note to check in with them again in a few days.

What if Something Unexpected Comes Up in Your Conversation?

Sometimes a conversation raises an issue or a feeling that you did not expect. Again, you can't be expected to have all of the answers, but remember that:

- If they don't want to speak about it, respect their choice, but leave the door open for another conversation at another time.
- It may take multiple attempts to have the conversation.
- Just by showing support and offering to talk, you can make a difference. The person might take action at a later stage or continue the conversation with others.
- If they disclose that they are at are feeling suicidal or they are planning to hurt themselves or others, seek guidance from a manager, HR professional or EAP immediately, or contact your local emergency life line.

Some Helpful Resources



let's end mental health discrimination

Time to Change

[Go to website](#)



Better mental health in the workplace

Heads Up

[Go to website](#)



RUOK (Australia)

[Go to website](#)



Mind UK

[Go to website](#)