

# Mental Health – Having Courageous Conversations Fact Sheets



## HOW CAN I SUPPORT SOMEONE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES?

Often we are hesitant to reach out to help a friend or co-worker who is struggling for fear of saying the wrong thing, offending the other person, or worrying that you are not qualified to ask about their health.

However, asking someone a simple “Are you okay?” is a great place to start when it comes to supporting individuals who may be facing mental health challenges. Remember, you don’t need to be a therapist to show compassion and empathy to individuals who may be facing struggles or challenges with their mental health.

## HOW CAN WORKPLACES SUPPORT THEIR WORKERS?

Workplaces have a responsibility to protect workers’ health and safety, including to protect them from any workplace factor that may impact their mental health. This duty must be balanced with other responsibilities such as fulfilling business and operational requirements. An organization’s key asset is their workers, and ensuring a worker is healthy and able to perform their duties to the best of their ability is usually considered to be the right thing to do. Creating a safe space so the worker can share and discuss their concerns will foster a caring culture of support in which everyone benefits.

## HOW DO I HAVE “THAT” CONVERSATION WITH A WORKER?

If a change in a worker’s behaviour or performance is noticed, there is a duty to inquire. A meeting should be scheduled to discuss any concerns and issues that may be noticed. If there are concerns about performance and completing work, this fact should not be the first focus. Start with what you have observed, such as “I’ve noticed lately...” or “You haven’t been yourself lately, are you okay?”

These conversations may not be successful the first time, but continual follow up and discussion should bring about trust and empathy so the employee feels comfortable in sharing if there is something affecting their mental health. Active listening skills are necessary so the worker feels safe and secure in sharing private details about their mental health.

## WHAT ARE SOME TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE VERBAL COMMUNICATION?

- Focus your attention on the other person to let them know you are interested in what they have to say.
- Listen carefully. Do not interrupt with unsolicited advice or criticism.

- Be observant. Decide if it is a good time to interrupt, or if you should wait for a more appropriate time to speak.
- Be aware of how you are delivering your words.
- Speak calmly, quietly, and confidently.
- Use common words. Do not use official language, jargon, or complex terminology.
- Encourage the person to talk.
- Remain open minded and objective.
- Acknowledge the person's feelings. If they appear upset, indicate that you can see they are upset.
- Try to understand. Ask questions like "help me understand why you are upset." Once you think you understand, repeat it back to the person so they know you understand.
- Remain calm if the situation becomes heated, and try to gently calm the other person (but do not yell "calm down!"). Do not allow the other person's anger to become your anger.

#### **WHAT ARE TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR AND COMMUNICATION?**

- Use calm body language. Have a relaxed posture with unclenched hands and an attentive expression.
- Position yourself at a right angle to the person, rather than directly in front of them.
- Give the person enough physical space. This distance varies by culture but normally 2 to 4 feet is considered an adequate distance.
- Get on the other person's physical level. If they are seated, try kneeling or bending rather than standing over them.
- Pay attention to the person. Do not do anything else at the same time such as answer phone calls, read e-mails, etc.
- Do not stand or sit in a challenging stance such as:
  - standing directly opposite someone
  - putting your hands on your hips
  - pointing your finger
  - waving your arms
  - crossing your arms
- Do not glare or stare. It may be perceived as a challenge.
- Do not make sudden movements. These movements can be seen as threatening.

#### **WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE?**

Some strategies for creating a positive space for protecting mental health include:

- Create an organizational culture that values worker input in all aspects, including planning, policy making, and setting goals.
- Be sure that managers and supervisors act to support the organization's values.
- Balance job demands with workers' capabilities and resources.
- Have clearly defined job descriptions to help people understand their roles and what is expected of them.
- Provide leadership and mental health training for managers and supervisors to learn their roles in promoting positive mental health.
- Encourage and create opportunities for learning, skill development, personal growth, and social interaction with other workers.
- Address psychosocial hazards as equally as you would safety or other hazards.
- Provide opportunities or programs that assist individuals in maintaining good health, such as a fitness policy or healthy food choices.

#### **WHAT CAN WORKERS DO TO ADDRESS THEIR MENTAL WELL-BEING?**

Some strategies for workers to protect their mental health include:

- Seek help when needed. Talk to your supervisor, human resources, or health and

- safety representative. Use the Employee Assistance Program if available.
- Participate in planning with your manager to balance work demands and work load.
  - Find a hobby or activity that helps you relax and brings happiness, and then do it regularly.
  - Share your feelings with someone you trust, or write them down in a journal.
  - Acknowledge when things are going well. Celebrate your successes.
  - Get to know who you are, what makes you happy, and what your stress triggers are. Learn to acknowledge what you can and cannot change about yourself or the situation.
  - Develop healthy habits such as regular exercise, adequate sleep, and a balanced diet.

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