
Colleagues, employees and mental health in the workplace

Summary

- If someone's life is in immediate danger call triple zero (000) and remain with them until help arrives.
 - Watch for signs that a work colleague or employee needs your support including: arriving late; seeming stressed, tired or anxious; avoiding social activities; and having trouble concentrating.
 - If there is someone else who is a better choice than you to talk to a distressed colleague, such as a manager or an HR person, talk to them about your concerns.
 - Listen properly, maintaining eye contact and ask questions if you are not sure what someone means. Let your colleague know that you are there for them and follow up a week or two later.
 - Access confidential advice and support by calling Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.
-

If you are worried about someone that you work with because their behaviour is concerning you and others, there is a good chance that they need some extra support. They may be struggling with relationship problems, depression, anxiety or some other kind of mental illness.

You might think it is not your place to talk to them about how they are feeling, especially if they are not a close friend, but there is nothing wrong with checking in to see if someone is okay. By just asking them if they are okay, you are showing that you care and offering them the chance to talk about what is troubling them.

Signs that a work colleague needs help

Keep an eye out for signs that a work colleague or employee needs your support. They might be:

- turning up late to work
- looking tired and seeming stressed
- having trouble concentrating, making decisions and managing multiple tasks
- being unusually emotional and getting frustrated with people
- avoiding social activities
- sitting alone at lunchtime
- unable to accept negative feedback
- drinking more alcohol than normal
- taking extra leave
- avoiding certain workplace activities such as staff meetings
- getting overwhelmed or easily upset
- becoming aggressive and threatening others
- taking illegal drugs.

Getting ready for the conversation

Before you start a conversation, it is a good idea to plan ahead. Think about what you will say and make sure you have plenty of time in case the conversation is long.

Decide whether you are the best person to be having the conversation. If there is someone else who may be a better option, such as a manager or an HR person, talk to them about your concerns.

Choose the right moment and find a quiet place that will make the person feel more comfortable. Make sure it is not a time when they will be distracted and avoid communal areas where you may bump into managers or other staff members.

Do a little research into mental health support services and helplines that you may be able to suggest if the need arises.

Talking things through

It is okay if you do not know how to begin. Just be supportive and caring, as you would with a friend.

You do not have to have all the answers or even know much about mental illness. But if you talk about things openly and honestly, people are more likely to ask for help. As long as you approach the conversation in a caring way and listen carefully to what they say, you may be able to help them find the support they need.

Try to mention specific things that have made you worried, such as eating alone at their desk, or seeming very anxious in a meeting.

Listening carefully

It is important to listen properly, maintaining eye contact and asking questions if you are not sure what they mean. Stay relaxed and be conscious of your body language. Let them take their time telling their story and listen without judgment.

If they feel comfortable around you, they are more likely to open up about how they are feeling. If they get upset, try not to take it personally, and explain that you are just concerned and you want to help. Finally, repeat back to them your understanding of their concerns, so they know that you have heard them properly.

Responding to your work colleague's needs

You will not be able to solve all of their problems but you can talk to them about how they may be able to improve their situation. Let them know that you will respect their privacy. Ask them if there is anything that you can do to help and suggest any mental health services that you think might be a good option for them.

Many people struggling with mental illness find the process of looking for mental health help overwhelming. You could offer to do some research into mental health support services and organise a time to meet with them again to discuss what you have found.

If they have been unwell for more than a couple of weeks, encourage them to talk to a doctor or a healthcare professional. Focus on the benefits of seeing a doctor but also let them know that it may take time to find the right person and that that is normal.

Following up on a conversation

It is a good idea to follow up on any conversation you have had. Check in with the person in a week or two and, as you did with your initial conversation, choose the right time and the right place. Ask them how they are feeling and if they can manage things better than before. Let them know you are still there for them and you are ready to help.

Do not be disappointed if they are not ready to act on anything. People need to get support in their own time. Stay in touch and show you care. Even if you do not talk about the issue again, just knowing that you are there can make all the difference to a person in need.

Suicide prevention

If your work colleague talks about harming themselves or suicide, it is important that you take them seriously. Do not get angry or upset. They will only feel guilty and it will make things worse. Instead, tell them that these thoughts are common but it does not mean that they have to act on these feelings.

Ask them if they have made any plans to end their life. If they have, stay close by and make sure they are not left alone.

If the person's life is in immediate danger call triple zero (000) and remain with them until help arrives.

Access confidential mental health advice and support by calling mental health helplines such as Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

Where to get help

- Your doctor

- Lifeline, call 13 11 14
- SANE Australia, call 1800 18 SANE (7623)
- beyondblue, call 1300 22 4636
- Suicide Call Back Service, call 1300 659 467

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Better Health Channel - (need new cp)

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2020 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.