

Starting a mental health conversation

We all have mental health. Sometimes we feel good and sometimes we don't. There are times when we feel low, anxious, upset or angry and there are periods when it feels especially difficult to manage these feelings. Life events and stresses such as bereavement, car accidents, prolonged illness, the end of a relationship or problems at work can test our resolve. These kinds of events are often triggers for mental health issues.

The most commonly diagnosed mental health conditions in the UK are depression and anxiety, or a mixture of the two, although no two people experience exactly the same symptoms. Depression typically refers to prolonged low feelings, hopelessness and lack of motivation, inertia, reduced ability to sleep and can be accompanied by physical illness. Anxiety usually involves high levels of worry, intrusive thoughts, and can be accompanied by a loss of self-belief, obsessive behaviours and commonly, panic attacks.

When people have mental health challenges, they can often feel stigmatised by them. They can view their problem as a weakness, feel embarrassed by it and reluctant to talk about it with anyone. But by not sharing their feelings, they can make a problem worse.

When someone seems out of sorts or low, it's easy to tell yourself they probably want to be left alone with their thoughts. And, let's face it, we all prefer to avoid awkward conversations when we can. But asking how someone is and showing them you're in their corner could be the first step to their recovery. It shows you care. When somebody's confidence and self-esteem is low, it can be nourishing to know a friend or colleague cares about them. Your empathy and concern will show them that they count, and that it's okay not to feel okay.



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Here are some signs that a friend or a colleague might be struggling

- Changes in behaviour, mood or how they interact with colleagues – more tearful, angry, hopeless, overwhelmed, moody, withdrawn or manic
- Changes in motivation, work performance and output
- Struggles to concentrate or make decisions
- Changes in appearance – weight gain or loss, appearing tired or unwell
- Loss of interest in activities they previously enjoyed
- Frequent lateness, complaints of disrupted sleep
- Increase in drinking, smoking or changes in appetite
- Increased absence or frequent illness.
- Sleeping more than usual or inability to sleep.

Tips for starting a mental health conversation

We all exchange pleasantries through the day. But when we ask “how are you?” we normally accept the vague responses we receive: “sound ... not bad ... ok .. bearing up ...” How can we dig deeper and unearth how a friend or colleague is really thinking? Here are some tips.

Don't wait for the perfect moment

Asking somebody to speak frankly about their mental wellness is hard at the best of times, so why heap the pressure on yourself and them by manufacturing a set-piece discussion? Just build a conversation into the working day. The idea is to normalise conversations about mental health, not over-dramatize them. People are likelier to speak openly when they're going about their day's work and don't feel under scrutiny. And eye contact can be intimidating for some people – especially if they're struggling to speak their mind. So why not ask your colleague how they are when you're prepping, dicing, filleting, stacking luggage or making up a bed?

Don't take “fine” for an answer

We often feel uncomfortable opening up when someone asks how we are. When you're feeling down, feelings of low self-worth can leave you reluctant to burden others with your problems. The result is that we often say we're okay when really we're not. Asking twice is a good way of letting someone know you really are interested in their well-being. Try saying “no, really, is everything okay?” or ask “how are you on a scale of one to ten?”. By persisting, you're signalling to them that you care and want to listen to them. Or why not let the conversation flow in another direction, before asking again? And remember the power of the pause: a moment of silence in a conversation tells the person you're concerned about that you've got time for them, that you want to hear what they've got to say.

Mind your language - and be a good listener

There's no one right way of expressing yourself; the important thing is to be empathetic and genuine. It's important not to judge people. Just let them speak – and listen. Don't jump in too soon with advice. Offer reassurance: saying “I'm sorry you're having a difficult time” shows you care. But never say things like “don't be silly”. Even if they're well-intended, negative comments can knock self-confidence and reinforce embarrassment. Have a few lines up your sleeve: “we're all human.” “We all have mental health.” “We all feel low sometimes.” Be patient and to let the person know that you are there for them, care for them and are ready to support them.

Don't worry that you're not an expert

You're not a therapist, and you're not conducting a formal interview. You're just a concerned friend or colleague, and that alone is a powerful thing. Simply by being open, intuitive, sensitive, kind and encouraging, you can help someone you're concerned about. You don't need to have all the answers, you just need to remind them that there are people who care about them, people who can help. And if what you say doesn't come out sounding quite right, stop and try again. Even signposting them to an organisation that deals with mental health issues can be the beginning of their journey to recovery.

Talk about yourself

If you want someone to speak openly about themselves, sharing your own feelings can help encourage them. Perhaps confide in them that you get a little low sometimes, worry about things, or perhaps struggle to sleep. Doing so demonstrates your empathy and ability to talk about feelings, and can reassure them that you aren't going to judge them.

Be specific, where possible

If you know that someone has experienced mental illness - maybe they've had time off work recently, or talked about it being depressed - don't be afraid to refer to this when you ask how they're doing. There's no need to refer to specific details. Simply ask "how are things now?" or "are you back at work?" shows that person that they have nothing to feel awkward about. If you think someone has been acting differently it's OK to mention that too, if it is done in a kind way. "You've seemed a bit quiet recently, is everything alright? I'm here if you want to talk." This shows that you care and opens the door for them to chat about their issues when they're ready.

Any conversation is good, whatever form it takes

Talking to someone face to face allows you to show you care through expressions and tone of voice. And it enables you to read the body language of the person you want to help. But it's okay to use digital forms of communication, too. The occasional text or direct message on Twitter tells somebody you value them and you're thinking of them.

Don't give up

You may not kick-start a conversation at first attempt. But simply by trying to do so, you've sown a seed of trust in their mind. If the person you're concerned about isn't ready to discuss their feelings with you just yet, you need to respect that and not force the issue. But leave the door open for another conversation another time. And be patient - you may need to have a few tries to open a conversation. Even if someone doesn't feel like talking at that moment, they know you'll be there to listen when they're ready.

What if you're concerned that the person is suicidal?

If you have concerns that someone you know might be suicidal, sharing this with an appropriate colleague or relative is often a good starting point. This way, you're not having to deal with your worries about your colleague alone which can in itself be scary for you. If the situation feels more immediate, and an intervention might be necessary, it's best to seek the assistance and advice of the experts who deal with such situations all the time. This can include the GP, The Samaritans, the EAP 24/7 helpline and in an emergency, taking the colleague to the nearest A&E and asking to speak to the on-duty psychiatrist. They will be able to assess the risk medically and take an appropriate course of action to ensure the colleague is safe with a prevention plan in place going forward.

Further help and information
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