

Conversation Guide

Mental Health-Related Stigma in the Workplace



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Conversation Guide

Creating a mentally healthy workplace that is free of mental health-related stigma is important for the psychological wellbeing of all workers.

A supportive psychosocial environment starts with having open conversations about mental health and what assists workers with maintaining optimal wellbeing in the workplace. The negative perceptions and attitudes that are sometimes associated with experiencing mental health issues can be a barrier to workers feeling comfortable to talk about their mental health challenges and seeking help early. At the same time, letting a worker know that you are worried about them and starting a conversation about their mental health can

sometimes be daunting. You do not need to be a health professional to provide support to your workers or to reach out to someone you are worried about.

This guide aims to provide managers and supervisors with strategies and resources that might be helpful when preparing to have a conversation with your team members about mental health. It highlights things to consider, including the approach you take and the language you use when having a supportive conversation with a worker about their mental health and wellbeing. It also provides contact information and links to other valuable mental health support resources.

Below are a number of things to consider before you approach the person you have concerns about:

How ready and prepared are you to have this conversation?

- Ensure that you have **prepared** yourself and are in the right headspace to have a conversation that may make you uncomfortable or may be challenging. You might like to use Mind's [Wellness Action Plan](#) and the other resources for managers and supervisors listed on www.comcare.gov.au/mentalnotes to prepare for the conversation.
- Ask yourself: Am I able to **genuinely listen** and give the person all the time that they may need?
- Take some time to **reflect** on how someone approached you when you were having difficulties. How did that make you feel? What did they do that helped you?
- If you are worried that you might say the wrong thing or cannot support the person, have a conversation, or try a **role-play with a mentor** or a colleague.
- Remember that you **cannot force** somebody to open up and it is their choice if they would like to seek help. The purpose of starting a conversation is not so you can 'fix' their problems, but to create a safe space for them to speak freely and not be judged. (Based on R U OK? Conversation Guide, 2022)
- Ensure you have the contact details for your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and/or another relevant **support service** that you can share with the person. As a starting point, consider the service options listed at the end of this resource.

When initiating a conversation about mental health issues, your approach should consider: who, when and where

Who

- Is the person comfortable having this conversation with you, or is there someone else in the organisation that they would prefer talking to?
- EAP services or other support services are also available if the person prefers. You can offer support reaching out to services, as the person may prefer that someone else initiates this contact.

When

- Identify when the most appropriate time is to have the conversation, considering the risk of interruption.
- Assess your preparedness to create a safe space and engage in a potentially difficult or distressing conversation. Pick a time when you feel ready, if possible.

Where

- Find or arrange a private, safe, and quiet location with reduced risk of interruption to approach the person.
- Meet the person in a safe space and let them decide where they feel comfortable continuing the conversation. For example, they might want to go for a walk, get a coffee or sit in the park.

(Adapted from Australian Psychological Society, 2013)

Important reminders and conversation tips

- Firstly, ensure that the person is aware of your obligation to maintain appropriate privacy and confidentiality.
- Listen openly to the individual and ensure you use appropriate language.
- Ask open-ended questions and more clarifying questions for better understanding. Be comfortable to use pauses and silence to allow the person to speak freely. Avoid making/asking leading comments or questions.
- Avoid being judgemental and do not minimise their experiences by telling them "it could be worse" or "just don't think about it".
- When sharing observations about the person's changes in behaviour, try to make sure that they are your own (e.g., "I've noticed you seem to be falling behind on deadlines", not "the team tells me you're falling behind").
- If you have said something that has upset the person, don't get defensive, instead apologise, and let them know you are not trying to offend, that you want to help but may not know how to approach the subject in the best way.
- Listen to their feedback, be open to changing your approach and conversation style. Changing the way we think and speak is a process that with time can have a big impact on a person feeling stigmatised or supported. (Based on Stampede Stigma, 2022; Comcare, 2019)



Sample face-to-face conversation responses and continued conversation leads

If you are concerned about somebody and feel as though something has changed, check in with them and see how they are going. This may be as simple as asking "how are you?". Be prepared for responses such as "good thanks" or "not bad". It is important to keep in mind that communication is not just what we say but how we say it.

When approaching the person be aware of your body language, tone of voice and behaviour. It is okay to ask follow-up questions or more clarifying questions. Here are some conversation *suggestions* for how to follow up different answers to "how are you?"

Reaction 1 - How to respond when someone answers "Good thanks"

"I ask as you don't seem yourself, is there anything you would like to talk about?"

"I am always here if you would like to chat."

"I have felt really overwhelmed lately, how are you coping with work?"

"I sensed some hesitation, you seem preoccupied, did you want to talk about it?"

"Often when I'm juggling work and life pressures, it can feel overwhelming. Is this the same for you?"

Reaction 2 - How to respond when someone answers "I am having a hard time"

"I am free to listen if you would like to talk."

"That would be difficult, what's been going on?"

"I sensed you might be struggling, I'm here for you. Do you feel comfortable talking about it with me?"

"I have some time now; would you like to get a coffee?"

"I'd like to help; can I support you in some way? There are some great tools that I have used to recognise when I am struggling and prompt me to seek help like the [Wellness Action Plan](#)."



Show support

Sample connecting conversation starters for online communication

It is important to let the person know that you are thinking about them and are available to talk if they wish to. However, do not pressure them to reply and check in with them regularly to let them know they are supported.

Some examples of how to connect using text are provided: (based on R U OK?, 2022)

"No pressure to reply - I wanted to let you know that I've been worried about you lately and I get the sense that you might be struggling. I'm here if you want to catch up or if you need anything."

"No pressure to reply - I wanted to let you know that I've been thinking about you lately and I hope you're alright. I'm here if you want to chat or need help with anything."

"No pressure to reply - I get the sense you are going through some tough times now, as you haven't really been yourself lately. And I wanted to let you know I'm here if you feel up to talking and want to support you if you need anything."

Language and labels

Avoid using negative or judgmental language, certain language can sensationalise mental health issues and suggest there is a reduced quality of life for people experiencing it. Language can label a person and reinforce stigma. People-first language allows for prioritisation of the person over the mental health condition.

People-first language emphasizes abilities while avoiding language that implies negative stereotypes or that the individual is 'lacking something'. (MHCC, 2020; CDC, 2022)

Here are some examples of Do's and Don'ts in relation to language and stigma:

Do



- Ask the person how they want their experiences described and what terminology they prefer to use.
- Where appropriate, use person first language such as a person "with experiences of", "living with" mental health issues.
- Where appropriate, use official/professional terms such as antidepressants, psychiatrists or psychologists.
- Practice empathy and be kind to others.
- Acknowledge that the person you are speaking with is experiencing some difficulties and that you want to support them.

Don't



- Assume that everyone with experiences of mental health issues is comfortable using the same terminology to describe their experience.
- Use stigmatising language that labels a person, for example "schizophrenic", "anorexic", "depressed" or "bipolar".
- Use terms like "victim", "suffering from" or "affected with" a mental illness.
- Use terms such as "happy pills", "shrinks" or "quacks".
- Minimise what someone may be going through, e.g., "it could be worse..."
- Tell them that you know how they feel. (Based on: On Our Sleeves, 2019 and Everymind, 2022).



Support services for managers and workers

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue Support Service 1300 22 4636
- SANE Australia 1800 18 SANE (7623)
- NewAccess Workplaces - Beyond Blue
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support Line - 13 YARN (9276)

Resources

The following resources contain more information about starting a conversation with someone who may be experiencing psychological distress.

Resource	Description	Link
Mind- Guide for line managers: Wellness Action Plans (WAPS)	Provides a guide to a proactive approach to promoting and managing wellbeing in the workplace. Included a Wellness Action Plan template.	Wellness Action Plan
RU OK- How to ask webpage	Links to learn the signs, take the RU OK quiz, Conversation guide and framework, interactive role play of conversation scenarios using google assistant and video resources.	How to ask "Are you OK?"
RU OK- Supporting someone online webpage	Tips on what to look out for, reaching out, listening and connecting them to support	Tips for talking to someone online
Beyond Blue- Talking to someone you are worried about webpage	Guidance on when to ask, some conversation starters, what to/ not to say, preparedness, safety plans and self-care	Talking to someone you're worried about
Mind for better mental health webpage	Emotional support and practical support tips <i>NB. Contacts are UK based, please refer to Australian numbers</i>	How to help someone seek mental health support
EveryMind organisation webpage	Myths and misconceptions about mental illness, preferred language to eliminate stigma	Language and stigma
On Our Sleeves organisation webpage	How to guides on the do's and don'ts when talking to someone about their mental health	Dos and Don'ts When Talking About Mental Health
Stampede stigma a wellways initiative webpage	A mental health inclusive language guide for anyone wanting to use language respectfully and inclusively when referring to mental health issues	Inclusive language guide
Mental Health First Aid community webpage	How to use compassionate language for mental health, describes supportive, harmful, and inclusive language and how to be an ally to improve mental health literacy.	Words Matter - Compassionate Language for Mental Health
Mental Health Commission of Canada blog post	Discussing how to combat mental health stigma with a shift towards people-first language	Combat Mental Health Stigma with a Shift Towards People-First Language
Beyond Blue- I know I need support, but how do I ask for it webpage	Reasons we should talk to someone, not knowing what to say, knowing how you feel but not what you need, what if they're not helpful	I know I need support, but how do I ask for it?

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Check in

Seek help

