



“WHAT MADE A HUGE DIFFERENCE WAS BEING ASKED IF I WAS OKAY-SIMPLE AS THAT!”

Mental health is a sensitive and personal issue. But, like any health problem, most people prefer honest and open inquiries over avoidance. Open communication can reduce stigma, break down barriers, and build trust—which, in turn, promotes long-term, positive behavioral change. Often employees will not feel confident speaking up to ask for help, so a supervisor making the first move to open up a dialogue can be key. Workplace cultures that encourage disclosure of mental health challenges and open dialogue also are important. Below we provide basic tips to give supervisors and colleagues confidence to initiate such conversations.

BASIC CONVERSATION TIPS TO GUIDE SUPERVISORS & COLLEAGUES:

TIP 1

If you have noticed a change in the person, no matter how small, trust your gut instinct. Err on the side of checking on the person.

TIP 2

If there are specific grounds for concern, such as impaired performance, it's important to address these at an early stage. Avoid making assumptions that the individual is lazy, uncooperative etc. Impaired performance can be a sign of declining mental health. In all cases, people should be treated in the same way as someone with a physical health condition.

TIP 3

Be aware that problems in an individual's personal life can often have a negative effect on their mental and emotional well-being at work and vice versa.

TIP 4

Be ready for the conversation. Are you in a good headspace? Are you willing to genuinely listen and allow the person to fully express their emotions? Can you give as much time as needed to avoid interrupting or rushing the conversation?

TIP 5

The good news is that you may not have to “reinvent the wheel.” Think of times when you already have had some success having these types of challenging conversations. What did you do that led to that success?

TIP 6

Broach the subject in a private and confidential location where the individual can feel more at ease. Sometimes a neutral space outside the workplace is a helpful option.

TIP 7

Questions should be simple, open, and non-judgmental to give them ample opportunity to explain the situation in their own words.

TIP 8

Self-Disclosure can be powerful and effective. You can say something like, “I know when I went through something similar, talking to a professional really helped me out. Would you like me to help you book an appointment?”

TIP 9

If the person doesn't want to talk to you or says “I'm fine,” suggest that they talk to a trusted person such as their partner, spouse, another family member, or friend. Check in again as necessary if you are still concerned.

TIP 10

Lawyer Assistance Programs (LAP) and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are excellent resources for how to navigate these types of situations.

TIP 11

A simple way to provide support is by genuinely asking “Are you OK?”

SIGNS IT MAY BE TIME TO HAVE A CONVERSATION:

- Taking longer to do tasks.
- Having difficulty making decisions.
- Missing deadlines.
- Being less patient with colleagues, staff, or clients.
- Avoiding work.
- More likely to get into conflict.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Not following up with clients.

CONVERSATION CHECKLIST:

- Speak calmly.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Show empathy and understanding.
- Be prepared for some silences and be patient. Silence can give the individual space to gather themselves and share their concerns thoughtfully.
- Focus on the person, not fixing or solving the problem.
- Avoid making assumptions or being prescriptive.

QUESTIONS/STATEMENTS THAT MAY HELP:

Mention specific things that have caused you to be concerned:

- I know there's been some big life changes for you recently. How are you doing?
- I've noticed that you seem to be really tired lately. Are you OK?
- You don't seem yourself lately. Do you want to talk about it?
- With everything that's going on lately, you've been on my mind. How are you?
- You seem to be a bit (feeling) (down/upset/under pressure/frustrated/angry). Is everything okay?
- I've noticed you've been (state behavior—e.g., arriving late/missing deadlines/not following up with clients) recently, and I wondered if you're okay?
- Is there anything I can do to help?

QUESTIONS TO ENCOURAGE ACTION:

- Has anything or anyone been helpful in the past?
- What would you like to have happen?
- What support do you think might help?
- Can you think of ways I can help? How can I help you?
- Have you contacted the LAP, your doctor, or looked for help elsewhere?

QUESTIONS TO AVOID:

- You're clearly struggling. What's up?
- Why can't you just get your act together?
- What do you expect me to do about it?
- Your performance is really unacceptable right now. What's going on?
- Everyone else is in the same boat and they're okay. Why aren't you?
- Who do you expect to pick up all the work that you can't manage?

ENSURE CONFIDENTIALITY:

- People can understandably be anxious about disclosing, so be prepared to assume responsibility for some confidential and sensitive information.
- Create strict policies about who is made aware of disclosures. As a rule, it should involve as few people as possible.
- Reassure the individual that any private information they disclose will not be leaked to their colleagues.
- Discuss with the individual any information they would like shared with colleagues and how, as this can be very supportive for some people.

****Consult with your LAP or other mental health professional about steps to take if you become aware that an employee may be having suicidal thoughts and feelings.**

WELLNESS ACTION PLANS:

A Wellness Action Plan (WAP) is a personalized, practical tool that we all can use—whether or not we have a diagnosable mental health condition—to help identify what keeps us well at work, what causes us to become unwell, and the support we would like to receive to boost our well-being or support us through recovery. (You can find a WAP Template at pages 40-42 of the [People Managers' Guide to Mental Health](#).)

Preparing WAPs helps employees understand what helps them stay well at work or how to manage a mental or emotional issue. Preparing WAPs can open up a dialogue with supervisors and among colleagues to help everyone better identify red flags and understand how to support each other's well-being. This, in turn, can lead to greater team cohesion, performance, and job satisfaction.

Introducing new employees to WAPs is one way legal employers can demonstrate their commitment to well-being from the very beginning of employment, sending a clear message that proactive management of well-being matters. Please note that the development and sharing of WAPs requires an organizational culture that enables vulnerability and values and supports employees' well-being.

WHAT SHOULD A WAP COVER?

- Approaches that individuals, supervisors, and organizations can adopt to support individual well-being at work.
- Early warning signs of poor well-being to be aware of.
- Situations at work that can lead to overwhelming stress.
- Details of the circumstances when they've felt increased well-being.
- Potential impact of poor mental and emotional health on performance.
- What support is needed and from whom to promote and protect well-being.
- Actions and positive steps that can be taken by them, their supervisor, or the organization when they are experiencing stress or feeling mentally and emotionally unwell.
- An agreed time to review the WAP and any support measures which are in place.
- Contact information in the event that there are concerns about their well-being.
- Anything else that they feel would be useful in supporting their well-being.

Consider consulting an LAP or EAP about how best to implement WAPs with your workforce.

*REFERENCES:

1. [R U OK?](#) is an Australian-based non-profit that provides helpful resources to guide conversations about mental health. Resources include an 11-page [Conversation Guide](#) as well as 1-page [Conversation Tip Sheet](#).
2. The [People Managers' Guide to Mental Health](#) was created by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, September 2018). The Guide is filled with good information about workplace mental health, including helpful conversation tips for managers.
3. The People Manager's Guide (pages 40-42) also contains a "Wellness Action Plan" template for use with the suggested activity above of encouraging teams to prepare WAPs.

DISCLAIMER:

This guidance is offered for general purposes only and should not be considered therapeutic services or to establish a therapist-client relationship. In case of emergency, go to the nearest emergency room or call 911. Please consult your LAP or a licensed mental health professional for more information about issues covered in this document.

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