



WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

A Conversation Guide for Managers



IN COLLABORATION WITH



WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM



Introduction

Managers are key to creating a supportive workplace culture. You are on the front line for employee mental health challenges—often in the best position to know how your team members are feeling and when employees need support.

That's why managers are encouraged to check in regularly with their teams about mental health and remind employees about the benefits and support services your company offers.

Tips For A Conversation About Mental Health

There's growing awareness of the importance of mental well-being, and a growing comfort in people talking about their mental health. It's completely normal to say that you're feeling under the weather when you have a cold; you should feel just as comfortable expressing a mental health challenge and requesting appropriate support.

Having open conversations about mental health is one of the most beneficial things that managers can do to show their support and encourage colleagues to seek help. It's important for managers to create and foster an environment in which team members feel safe sharing and asking for what they need.

These three steps offer a framework to help managers engage in appropriate and productive conversations about mental health with team members.

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American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association Foundation, Made of Millions, Mental Health Coalition, National Safety Council, and One Mind at Work.

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Step 1:

Prepare For The Conversation.

- **Know the symptoms.** It's important that you're able to recognize warning signs of stress, burnout or mental distress in your team members. Use these behavior changes as a cue to check in and start a conversation about addressing workplace stressors.
 - Signs of fatigue or exhaustion
 - Lack of focus, concentration, or motivation
 - Loss of appetite or sudden changes in weight
 - Irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Reduced productivity or increased mistakes on the job
 - Breakdown of routines or workplace systems

IMPORTANT NOTE:

Warning signs that point to urgent mental distress— including talk of **suicide**, warning signs of **alcohol or drug misuse**, signs of **disordered eating** or signs of **domestic abuse**—may signal the need for a more serious intervention and should be reported immediately to Human Resources.

- **Understand your role.** Your role in these situations is to connect employees to support services and help make it easier for workers to access the care they need—for example, by providing flexible scheduling or time off for therapy or counseling, offering mental health days and managing workload to facilitate work-life balance. Employees who are experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis may require professional support outside of your role as a manager.
- **Consider the appropriate environment.** A general wellness check may be appropriate in a team huddle or in a casual one-on-one meeting. For a more direct intervention, consider how to set up a private discussion that feels comfortable and safe. Avoid times or environments that might trigger alarm—for example, consider that setting up meetings at 4 p.m. on Friday are often thought of as a red flag for termination. **Morning hours** are considered best for engaging in difficult conversations.
- **Prepare company benefits and support options.** Brush up on the benefits and services your company offers to support mental wellbeing. If needed, explore whether additional community or national services are available to recommend. If there are specific organizational solutions you want to suggest, consider if you need to clear these with Human Resources or leadership in advance.



Step 2:

Start The Conversation.



- **Share observations with care and concern.** If you notice that someone's behavior has changed, it may be a good time to start a conversation. Point out that you've noticed a change in their behavior and convey your concerns.

Examples:

- "I noticed you are not speaking up in meetings as much as you used to. You also seem to be spending more breaks alone. Is everything okay?"
 - "You seem irritated with your colleagues lately. Is everything okay?"
 - "I noticed that you seem anxious lately. Is there anything I can do to help?"
 - "I'm concerned about you and wanted to check in."
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions give employees a chance to add detail and context to their experiences.

Examples:

- "I see that you are under a lot of pressure with this project. What are you doing to cope with stress and how can I help?"
- "I noticed that you are under a lot of stress at work. What can I do to support you?"
- "You appear to be upset about something. Are you comfortable telling me about what you are going through?"



- **Listen more than you speak.** Even in a workplace that has a supportive culture, it can be intimidating to talk about one's mental health. As a manager, you can make employees feel safe discussing their mental health through active listening, giving them space and acknowledging their perspective. Resisting the urge to break an uncomfortable silence can also help your employee to reflect and share their experience.

Examples:

- "I hear that you're feeling like..."
- "Wow, it really sounds like you're going through a lot. Tell me more about how you're taking care of yourself."
- "What can I do to make it easier for you to seek support?"



- **Lead with empathy.** Empathy, the ability to consider the position of the other person, can make a powerful impact when discussing mental health. Speak from a place of sincerity and compassion in order to help make it easier for employees to seek support. Validate and hold space for difficult emotions— don't brush over them. While the desire to help someone feel better is normal, jumping to false optimism can be counterproductive and keep an employee from seeking help. Validating the other person's outlook doesn't necessarily mean that you agree but communicates that you see where they are coming from.

Examples

- "I want you to know that I care."
- "I can understand how you would see things that way."
- "This must be difficult for you. What can I do to best support you?"

- **Affirm and empower your team members.** Alleviate concerns that an employee will be evaluated negatively on their work performance if they seek therapy or ask for other accommodations for a mental health issue. Acknowledge the courage, strength and perseverance it takes to talk about mental health and to ask for help.

Examples:

- “Thank you for trusting me enough to share this with me.”
 - “I admire the bravery it took for you to have this conversation today.”
 - “You are right to prioritize your mental health. I want you to know this isn’t going to affect how I view your work. I am here to support you to be your best self.”
- **Discuss next steps whenever an employee reaches out for support.** This includes collaborating on a plan for getting help. Empower your employees to make an appointment with a psychiatrist or therapist, attend a support group or find assistance through your company’s EAP. Finish the conversation with agreement on what each individual will do next. If you believe there is cause to be concerned about the employee’s personal safety or that of others, consult with Human Resources immediately.

Recognize that your job as a manager is to help eliminate work-related stressors. This could include a more flexible work arrangement, a temporary redistribution of responsibilities or additional support through mentorship or peer support programs. Organize notes from your discussion in a way that facilitates future reference, and, if appropriate, share the notes with Human Resources.

Examples

- “Now that you’ve shared your concern with me, what can I do to support you?”
- “What is your plan for support after you leave my office today?”
- “Is there anyone I can call or reach out to for you for extra support?”



Step 3:

Keep The Conversation Going.

- **Make a plan for ongoing check-ins.** Collaborate with your employee on a plan for ongoing support. This could be as simple as a routine check-in during weekly meetings. Use ongoing conversations as an opportunity to evaluate whether the solutions or resources you offered to an employee are working or if a new strategy should be considered.
- **Have an open-door policy.** Remind employees that it's okay to knock on your door or arrange a Zoom chat when they need support.
- **Normalize mental health in everyday conversations.** Use these discussion starters during team meetings or other group settings to encourage workplace discussions about mental health.

Examples:

- I was wondering if we could have a discussion about how everyone is feeling lately? Is there any information, resources or support that you need, or do you have any questions you'd like answered?"
- "Our team is going through an especially busy period. I know that I am at times feeling stressed and anxious, and occasionally have a difficult time concentrating. Is anyone else feeling the same? Is there anything I can do to help you prioritize or make things easier at work?"



Language Do's & Don'ts

Try these simple tips for talking about mental health.

Do Say

"Thank you for opening up to me."

"How are you feeling today?"

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Thank you for sharing."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Must be tough."

"I'm here for you when you need me."

"What support can I offer?"

"Can I help you navigate our mental health benefits?"

"Can I help you make an appointment with a counselor in our EAP?"

"Can I help you connect with a local community organization that can address your situation?"

"Can I help connect you with an Employee Resource Group or trained mental health ambassador in our company?"

"I'm here for you."

Don't Say

"It could be worse."

"Just deal with it."

"Snap out of it."

"Everyone feels that way sometimes."

"You may have brought this on yourself."

"We've all been there."

"You've got to pull yourself together."

"I'm sure it'll just blow over."

"Maybe try thinking happier thoughts."



Scenario Exercises

Practice considering how you might respond to the following situations. We've provided some sample responses for you.

Scenario 1

Chris, a member of your team, is delivering a presentation to senior leadership at your company. As the presentation progresses you notice that he is flushed, shaking and seems to be out of breath. When an executive leader asks him a question, Chris stammers through a response, eventually losing his words entirely. Embarrassed, Chris abruptly leaves the room.

Consider: What is the overarching issue?

Chris is clearly overwhelmed and may be exhibiting signs of a panic attack. Offer immediate support and collaborate with Chris on how you can help prevent feelings of overwhelm in the future.

Step 1: How would you prepare for this conversation?

WHAT YOU COULD DO

- Excuse yourself to check on Chris.
- Express care and concern for Chris.
- Provide Chris with a safe, private space to calm down.
- Prioritize Chris's immediate needs to recover from the panic attack before addressing bigger-picture questions.

WHAT YOU COULD SAY

- "I can see you are having a difficult time breathing right now. I want to make sure you are okay. Let's find somewhere private for you to take a breath."
- "What do you need right now?"

Step 2: How would you start the conversation?

WHAT YOU COULD DO

- Validate and normalize Chris's feelings.
- Affirm a culture of caring and alleviate Chris's concerns that the panic attack will negatively impact his job performance.
- Ask open ended questions to find out what was causing Chris to have this reaction.
- Paraphrase Chris's perspective. Remember it is not your role to diagnose the situation. Allow Chris to define his experience.
- Collaborate on a plan to address underlying causes of stress.
- Open the conversation for Chris to seek your support in the future.
- Connect Chris with appropriate resources.

WHAT YOU COULD SAY

- “It's normal to be concerned about giving a presentation. Needing a break doesn't impact how I view your performance. We can reschedule this for another time.”
- “What was causing you to feel overwhelmed just now?”
- “Have you ever gone through situations like this before? What typically causes you to feel this way?”
- “I hear you saying that you were already feeling nervous about this presentation and then felt put on the spot with the question asked of you.”
- “How can we help you feel better prepared for these presentations in the future?”
- “If you start to feel overwhelmed again, how can I best support you?”
- “Would you like to talk to anybody about what happened? Our company offers confidential EAP services and they can help you learn to identify triggers to feeling overwhelmed and make a plan to address them.”

Step 3: How would you keep the conversation going?

WHAT YOU COULD DO

- Create a long-term plan to address underlying trigger points or stressors behind Chris's panic attacks.
- Make a plan to help Chris feel prepared to identify and address future panic attacks when they occur.

WHAT YOU COULD SAY

- “Let's touch base ahead of your next presentation to see how you are feeling and get aligned on your needs.”
- “What signs should we look out for in the future? How can I support you if we notice these signs coming on?”

Scenario 2

Ayesha is normally a warm, enthusiastic member of your team, but lately has been withdrawn and irritable with her coworkers. And, despite working long hours, she has been missing deadlines. During a team huddle, she seems drowsy and unfocused until a coworker asks her a question about the status of a delivery due for fulfillment. She angrily snaps, “Do I have to do everything around here?” and storms off.

Consider: What is the overarching issue?

The long hours of work combined with missing deadlines may indicate that Ayesha is overwhelmed with her workload. Ayesha’s irritability and lack of focus may be signs of burnout. Consider how you can help Ayesha review and reallocate her responsibilities and how you might convey gratitude for her work, and collaborate with Chris on how you can help prevent feelings of overwhelm in the future.

Step 1: How would you prepare for this conversation?

WHAT YOU COULD DO

- Review Ayesha’s schedule and work load ahead of the conversation
- Prepare some possible solutions such as job duties that can be reallocated or adjusted as needed.
- Prepare supportive resources, such as instructions to access EAP services or other mental health support.
- Schedule a dedicated meeting time in the morning before Ayesha starts her day. She is most likely to feel the least overwhelmed at this time.
- Notify Ayesha ahead of time that you notice she has taken on a lot and you want to check in about her workload.

Step 2: How would you start the conversation?

WHAT YOU COULD DO

- Share your observations with care and concern.
- Ask open-ended questions about Ayesha's workload.
- Collaborate with Ayesha on a plan to adjust job duties.
- Show gratitude for Ayesha's work.
- Affirm that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.

WHAT YOU COULD SAY

"I've noticed that you've been working a lot of overtime lately, and that you seem to be getting frustrated with others. I checked in on your workload, and I can see that you've taken on a lot lately. I know that you are a go-getter, but I'm concerned that you might be feeling overwhelmed."

"How are you feeling about your current workload? What is feeling unmanageable right now?"

"What changes can we make to your workload to make things more manageable? I'd love to hear your thoughts, and I've prepared a few ideas if you'd like to go through them together."

"You've done so much for this company, Ayesha. I appreciate the initiative you've taken with all of these assignments. And it's okay to ask for help when you need it. We want to make sure you are set up for success, and that includes giving you the support you need."

Step 3: How would you keep the conversation going?

WHAT YOU COULD DO

- Make a recurring plan to check in with Ayesha about her assignments and her own mental health through standing meetings or a designated conversation.
- Ensure Ayesha feels publicly recognized and valued for her work, in a team meeting, or in a conversation with senior leadership.

WHAT YOU COULD SAY

"Thanks for making this plan with me. Let's check in for 15 minutes each week to see how it's going and consider if we need to make additional changes."

"I want to acknowledge Ayesha for going above and beyond these last few weeks to support our team's success through this especially busy quarter!"

Scenario 3

Lisa, a member of your team pulls you aside one day to express her concern for her coworker, Trevor. Trevor has recently returned to work from parental leave and has been struggling to balance work with the demands of a new baby at home. He frequently appears dazed and exhausted, occasionally dozing off in meetings. Earlier in the day he confided with Lisa that he feels overwhelmed and hopeless.

Consider: What is the overarching issue?

Trevor may be experiencing postpartum depression. Consider how you can support him in the short term by building capacity for flexibility with his work schedule and assignments. Collaborate with Trevor on a plan to get in touch with mental health support and parent resources.

Step 1: How would you prepare for this conversation?

WHAT TO DO

- Review team job duties and responsibilities in advance of the conversation to see how tasks can be reallocated to build in flexibility.
- Prepare a list of company resources and benefits for new parents and mental health support.
- Schedule a conversation with Trevor. Consider how to set up a friendly, welcoming environment, such as scheduling a coffee chat to check in.

Step 2: How would you start the conversation?

WHAT TO DO

- Be direct with your concerns
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Make space for difficult emotions without challenging or minimizing Trevor's experience.
- Validate and normalize Trevor's feelings.
- Connect him with appropriate resources.
- Normalize the use of resources.
- Offer to re-adjust work expectations for Trevor as he adapts to parenthood (e.g., offering a more flexible schedule, remote work opportunities, etc.)

WHAT TO SAY

"I sense that you've been feeling overwhelmed with the return back from parental leave."

"How have you been feeling since coming back to work?"

"It sounds like you are having a really difficult time."

"I hear you saying that you're feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. A lot of new parents feel this way."

"Have you thought about getting help for the way you are feeling? Our company offers options for mental health support as well as resources for new parents. I personally found these services very helpful when I came back from parental leave last year. Would you like to go through them together?"

"How can we make adjustments to support you as you continue your transition into parenthood?"

Step 3: How would you keep the conversation going?

WHAT TO DO

- Schedule recurring 1:1 meetings to check in with how Trevor is feeling.
- Prioritize flexibility for Trevor to seek supportive care, such as attending therapy sessions or participating in support groups.

WHAT TO SAY

"Let's touch base again next week to see how the new schedule is going for you."

"Let me know when you need time off to prioritize your family and your own well-being. We can work together to make adjustments to your schedule."

Need More Help?

There are many workplace mental health training and certification programs available for managers, and even some that provide custom coaching for specific industries with unique mental health needs. If you'd like additional training on workplace mental health, contact your Human Resources Department or consider this **Workplace Mental Health Ally Certification Program**

Supporting Employees in Crisis

The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** offers 24-hour, toll-free, confidential support for people in distress.

Call, text or chat 988 | Veteran Crisis Hotline: Press 1
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

The **SAMHSA National Helpline** is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) | TTY: 1-800-487-4889 | [Online Treatment Locator](#)

Additional Tools & Resources

- **Workplace Mental Health Playbook**
- **Roadmap to Addressing Mental Health in the Workplace: For Managers**
- **The Mental Health Matrix™**
- **Inclusive Language Guidelines**
- **Mental Health Support Resources**
- **Psych Hub: Mental Health Ally Training**

DISCLAIMER: Public health guidance on workplace mental health is evolving. Health Action Alliance is committed to regularly updating our materials once we've engaged public health, business and communications experts about the implications of new guidance from the mental health community and effective business strategies that align with public health goals.

This Guide provides an overview of workplace mental health issues, and is not intended to be, and should not be construed as, legal, business, medical, scientific or any other advice for any particular situation. The content included herein is provided for informational purposes only and may not reflect the most current developments as the subject matter is extremely fluid.

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A Message From One Mind At Work



The global workforce is struggling.

Employees are expecting more, and leaders want to take action. Where do they start?

The Mental Health at Work Index gives business leaders a practical framework with clear priorities to build a sustainable workplace mental health strategy.

The Index provides:

- A self-assessment that measures the maturity of workplace mental health programs and services
- Organizational benchmarking powered by strategic data collection
- An Algorithm-driven advice library that provides targeted resources to guide improvements and enhancements, enabling real-time feedback at scale

Learn more at www.mentalhealthindex.org

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