

Optima Health

Guidance:

Having conversations about our mental health

Introduction

Mental health is something we all have, and just like physical health, our mental health can be impacted by life events and our day to day e.g. stress at work, a relationship breakdown, a bereavement, loneliness or big life changes.

There are many healthy coping mechanisms you can use, one of which includes reaching out for help and talking to someone you trust. This guidance will explore tips on how to approach a conversation about mental health, whether for yourself or someone you line manage.

The benefits of talking to others

- **Helps you process your emotions** - When you are struggling, talking about it can help you to understand your emotions and identify practical things you can do going forwards.
- **Helps you feel less alone** - When you share your problems with others, it can help to combat feelings of loneliness. Knowing that others have experienced similar challenges can help you to feel less isolated and more understood.
- **Helps to route you onto support** - People may be able to signpost you on to further support to help with your struggles or challenges. For example, emotional support via a helpline, practical help through local services or financial assistance through charities.
- **Helps to reduce stigma** - When you talk openly about your mental health, it can help to reduce the stigma associated with talking about this topic. This, in turn, can make it easier for others to open up and seek support.

Talking to someone you trust

Talking to someone about how you feel can be daunting, especially if it's the first time you've spoken about your feelings to someone. Sharing your worries and anxieties is not always easy, but it can be a rewarding experience, and form part of your recovery journey. Below are some tips to help you get started.

Choose the right person
It's important to choose someone you trust who will be supportive. This could be a friend, family member, colleague, therapist or any other trusted person. If you're struggling at work, consider speaking with your line manager if this feels comfortable. They may be able to support you with reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

Try to be honest
When you talk to someone about your worries, it's important to be honest about how you are feeling. This can sometimes be difficult, but honesty and openness is key to getting the support you need.

Be patient
It may take time for the person you are talking with to understand what you are going through. Try to be patient and give them time to understand your situation.

Talking to your GP

The mental health charity Mind have provided the below tips to approach talking about mental health with your GP. Find more support on the Mind website.

- Try and be as **honest and open** as you can.
- Focus on **how you feel**, rather than on any mental health diagnosis.
- Explain **how things have been** for the past few months or weeks, and anything that has changed.
- Use **words and descriptions that feel natural to you**. Try to talk about how you're feeling in your own words.
- Try **not to worry that your problem is too small or unimportant.** Everyone deserves help and your GP is there to support you.
- **Don't be afraid to ask questions.** This includes if your GP says something you don't understand or that doesn't sound right to you.
- **Be kind to yourself,** especially if you're feeling very anxious, shy or afraid.

Supporting an employee

Line managers play a crucial role in promoting and supporting the mental health of their staff. As direct supervisors, they are often the first point of contact for people experiencing mental health problems. Find guidance below on how to approach a mental health conversation with an employee at work.

Find a private space
Locate a quiet space to have the conversation, away from other people or distractions.

Create a safe environment
Using 'active listening' techniques can help create a safe space for someone to talk. This includes listening non-judgementally, asking open-ended questions, and showing empathy. If the conversation is not in person, consider how you demonstrate these skills through your tone of voice.

Build your awareness
As well as completing any training available within your organisation, it can be helpful to learn about the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions to improve your awareness. There is a range of information available online from organisations such as Mind, Mental Health UK and the NHS.

Encourage an open culture
Support employees to share their thoughts and feelings, and help create an environment where they feel safe to do so. Encouraging senior leaders to speak openly about their own experiences can help others feel more comfortable opening up. Regular check-ins are also valuable, as well as reminding staff of the different types of support available to them.

Supporting an employee

Hybrid and remote working
When supporting employees who work remotely or in hybrid arrangements, be intentional about creating opportunities for regular, meaningful check-ins.

Virtual meetings or phone calls can still provide a safe and supportive space. Use video calls where possible to help build connection, and be mindful of your tone, pacing, and pauses, as these can be even more important when reading cues is more difficult.

Consider informal touchpoints too, such as a quick message or check-in call, to help maintain trust and visibility. It's also important to be flexible, recognising that employees may find it harder to open up when not physically present, so taking time to build rapport and reassure confidentiality can make a significant difference.

Signposting

Below are some further links to support which you may find useful:

- **Samaritans** - Call **116 123** for free, 24/7, confidential emotional support.
- **Mind** - Mental health information and support.
- **Every Mind Matters** - Tools and resources across multiple topics.
- **Acas** - Supporting mental health at work.
- **CIPD** - Offers guidance for HR around topics such as mental health.