

# LET'S TALK

## Talking at an early stage is vital. But who starts the conversation?

### LET'S SAY IT'S YOU...

Perhaps you've become worried about a member of staff or colleagues have raised concerns. Some of the key things to look out for are **changes** in an employee's usual behaviour. This may be poorer performance, tiredness or increased sickness absence. Maybe a normally punctual member of staff starts turning up late. Conversely, an employee may begin coming in much earlier and working later. Other signs might be tearfulness, headaches, loss of humour, changes in emotional mood or having problems with colleagues.

Alongside these insights, as a manager you'll be aware of the wider organisation's impact on employees. It might be the case that certain tasks, work environments, times of the day or particular teams are more likely to be associated with employees experiencing difficulties. Repeated organisational change and prolonged periods of uncertainty can also affect staff wellbeing.

Regular work planning sessions, appraisals or informal chats about progress are all ordinary management processes which provide neutral and non-stigmatising opportunities to talk about any problems an employee may be having.

Use open questions to allow the employee maximum opportunity to express concerns in his or her own way. For example: *"How are you doing at the moment?"* or *"What can I do to help?"*

If you listen, are supportive and show understanding, an employee will feel more able to talk<sup>10</sup> making it easier for you to offer the support that is needed.

Where performance is being affected, you may be concerned that giving criticism is going to cause your colleague distress or undermine their confidence and self-image even more. This is difficult. But it is important to be open and honest – hiding the problems won't make the situation any better. If you have specific grounds for concern – such as impaired performance, it is important to talk about these at an early stage. Ask questions in an open, exploratory and non-judgmental way. For example: *"I've noticed that you've been arriving late recently and wondered if there was a problem."*

When talking to an employee there are four useful points to remember:

- Don't assume work pressures affect everyone in the same way.
- Don't assume it has to do with work – it could be something going on at home that is affecting them.
- Make adjustments if a person is not coping.
- Conversations should be **positive and supportive** – explore the issues and how you can help.

### AND IF THEY COME TO YOU...

In one sense, you are to be congratulated – you've created a healthier working environment, one which has given staff the confidence to think they can talk to you.

All the same, this could have been a really big step for your colleague to take. Many employees feel uncomfortable talking to their manager about their mental health condition perhaps for fear it would go against them<sup>10</sup>. It's important to understand that reluctance to talk. Think back to when you have found talking to someone about something difficult. Ask yourself this question – how would you feel if you were about to tell somebody something about you you really didn't want them know?

Ask if the employee wants to bring an advocate, trusted colleague, friend or family member to support them. Some people might find it easier to talk to someone of their own choosing, e.g. a person of the same age, gender or ethnicity, or a colleague who is not their line manager.

Be clear about confidentiality and who will be told what. Explain the limits of your confidentiality – personal information is confidential but you may feel you need to seek advice from occupational health, HR or others. In such cases, agree who is going to be told what.

Agree with the employee how best to review the situation. If changes are being made, ask how they wish this to be communicated to other staff.

If it is too difficult for the employee to talk now reassure them that your door is always open.

DO	DON'T
Have a conversation in a private space – maybe outside the office, in a café or somewhere where the employee feels comfortable and conversations can't be overheard.	Don't attempt to start a conversation in front of everyone else.
Make sure there are no interruptions. Switch your mobile phone off.	Don't initiate a conversation if you've got another appointment looming.
Be focused. You only need information that will help you achieve the goal of supporting your employee.	Don't attempt to diagnose. Remember you're not a doctor or a counsellor.
Ask open, non-controlling questions. For example, "I was wondering how you were doing?"	Don't ask questions that could create pressure like "What's wrong with you, then?" or "Are you stressed or something?"
Use neutral language. For example, "How are feeling today?"	Don't use medical language linked to illnesses like "You seem depressed" unless the employee uses it.
Always allow the person time to answer.	Don't push for an answer. Be patient. And don't rush in with another question without listening to the answer you've been given.
Try and put yourself in the other person's position and see things from their perspective.	Don't tell the person what to do.
Make arrangements for a follow up meeting to review the situation.	Don't leave things up in the air.

*Adapted from 'It's Good to Talk'*  
Shaw Trust – [www.tacklementalhealth.org.uk](http://www.tacklementalhealth.org.uk)

Taking steps like those will pay enormous benefits. Being a MINDFUL EMPLOYER demonstrates a willingness to enable employees to talk about mental ill health without fear of rejection or prejudice. Attitudes are changing: indicating increased confidence compared to other previous research, a 2013 survey of people working for MINDFUL EMPLOYER Charter signatories found that 3 in 5 employees had talked to their manager about a current mental health condition<sup>10</sup>. The MINDFUL EMPLOYER survey showed that the most likely response to disclosure is one where the manager listens, is supportive and is understanding and this enabled appropriate action to be taken<sup>10</sup>.

## ISSUES TO TALK ABOUT

- Ask open questions about what is happening, how they are feeling, what the impact of the stress or mental health condition is. It is the employee's choice whether to reveal this but you can explain that it will be easier for you to make reasonable adjustments for a condition you know about.
- How long has the employee felt unwell? Is this an ongoing issue or something that an immediate action could put right?
- Discuss whether work has contributed to their distress. Listen without passing judgement and make sure you address their concerns seriously.
- Are there any problems outside work that they might like to talk about and/or it would be helpful for you to know about? (Don't put pressure on the person to reveal external problems in detail.)
- Talk about their own coping strategies and how the organisation can support them.
- Is the employee aware of possible sources of support such as relationship or bereavement counselling, drugs and alcohol services, legal or financial advice?
- Ask the employee if there is anything that you can do to help and make sure they are aware of any support the organisation may provide such as occupational health, counselling, Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), brief psychological therapies or health checks.
- Is there any aspect of the employee's medical care that it would be helpful for you to know about? (For example, side effects of medication that might impact on their work.) While you have no right to this information, the employee should be aware that you cannot be expected to make reasonable adjustments under the terms of The Equality Act if you are not informed about the problem (see also page 15).
- Does the employee have ideas about any adjustments to their work that may be helpful? These could be short or long term.
- Establish precisely what they wish colleagues to be told and who will say what to whom.
- Agree what will happen next and who will take what action.

Record all conversations accurately – not just to protect the organisation and the employee, but also to show that the actions have been carried out fully. Once the conversation has been recorded it is best practice to provide a copy to the member of staff involved and obtain their agreement to its accuracy.

## RESPONDING TO DISTRESS

Emotions are a natural part of life and sooner or later it is possible that a member of your staff will become upset. This can happen for any number of reasons and can be connected to something at work or outside of work. In all conversations, try to be sensitive to the level of information and support the employee can cope with at a given time. In the midst of a crisis they may not be able to think clearly and take on board information. The important points are to talk to them, reassure them their job is safe (unless of course that is a genuine, factual concern which is causing the distress), state positively that all help, assistance and support will be offered, and affirm that discussion will continue at a pace that suits them.

Problems can build up over time and whilst you may feel the pressure to take action immediately, it may be better to take some time to calm yourself, reflect and consider the options. Try to distinguish, with the person, between what is urgent and what is important. You may also need support for yourself in managing this kind of situation but do take into account the confidentiality of the employee. If the session is not proving helpful for the employee you could then rearrange for another time in the near future to discuss the issues when the person is less upset.

- Reassure them that it is OK to be upset and that you are listening.
- Ask if there is anyone they would like contacted or if they would like someone to be with them.
- Make sure the employee is offered and provided an appropriate space where they can express emotion freely and compose themselves in privacy.
- Alternatively, you might suggest that you both leave the building for a short time to go and have a coffee or a short walk to give the person time to collect themselves.
- Once they have recovered sufficiently, they may want to carry on working, take a break or go home.
- Reassure the employee that they are valued and that you support them, as they may feel embarrassed or ashamed about what has happened.
- Give them a copy of our ***Keeping Well at Work*** booklet – order online at [mindfulemployer.net](http://mindfulemployer.net)

## LEADING THE WAY

*In his report on staff health and wellbeing<sup>11</sup>, Dr Steve Boorman wrote 'The NHS should lead the way... as part of their staff health and wellbeing strategies, NHS Trusts should put in place arrangements to identify mental health issues affecting staff and ensure that these are tackled at an early stage.'*

**In any management position, productivity, performance and budgets will be your motivator to improving your service or business and often the true wellbeing of your workforce can be shielded away from either through ignorance, intolerance or fear.**

**I strongly believe that you must treat people as you would want to be treated and that if you were to build a team culture based only on that belief then you will, over time, reap the benefits.**

**Building a culture of openness and an atmosphere in which people feel safe to come and talk takes time, but investing your time in building relationships, getting to know your staff, and the way they behave and respond, often allows you to pick up at an early stage changes in someone's wellbeing. The way you as a manager behave on a daily basis will impact on staff feeling able to make that first step in seeking advice and support. Being calm, fair and interested may not seem the most dynamic attributes of a manager but will by far create a lasting impression on those you work with.**

**For me those attributes have had a direct impact on the success of keeping someone in the workplace whilst giving them the space to recover. For another person, it allowed them to come to the difficult but honest decision to move into a role less stressful and for another to find a way to work more flexibly to support their long term wellbeing. For me, the satisfaction came in knowing they have felt listened to, supported and safe.**

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## RECOGNISING WHEN PROFESSIONAL HELP IS NEEDED

Although people don't have to be 100% well to work and, in general, work is good for mental health, if someone continues to show signs of distress despite the reasonable adjustments and support you have provided then you should seek advice from human resources (HR) and/or refer the individual to occupational health (OH).

If you work for an organisation without HR or OH advisors you can encourage people to see their own GP and seek appropriate help. The new government funded Fit for Work service ([fitforwork.org](http://fitforwork.org)) offers independent occupational health advice and assessments.

If someone is talking about harming themselves or other people then do not hesitate to call upon expert health advice – including dialling 999 if you believe there is imminent risk to life.