Practical Tips: How to Talk with Employees about Mental Health Problems

With stress, depression and other forms of mental ill-health, the most difficult part is often to start the conversation with the affected employee. Here are CIPD/Mind's practical recommendations, summarised from their latest 'People Managers' Guide to Mental Health' guide.

To Start the Conversation	
Questions to ask	**Questions to avoid**
■ How are you doing at the moment? ■ You seem to be a bit down/upset/under pressure/frustrated/angry. Is everything okay? ■ I've noticed you've been arriving late recently and I wondered if you're okay? ■ I've noticed the reports are late when they usually are not. Is everything okay? ■ Is there anything I can do to help? ■ What would you like to happen? How? ■ What support do you think might help? ■ Have you spoken to your GP or looked for help anywhere else?	■ 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?

Managers should explore with any employee reporting a mental health issue how to address any difficulties which are work-related, which might in turn help them to cope with any problems in other areas of their lives. Managers should encourage employees to see their GP as a first step and ensure they are aware of any support available either from their employer, for example talking to mental health first aiders within the organisation, contacting the HR department, using a confidential employee assistance helpline, or from other sources, such as Mind's telephone helplines or Saneline (contact details below). Discussing relevant Mind information with the employee can also help.

Employers need to communicate clearly through policies on stress management or mental health that people with issues will be supported and outline what help is available, as well as being clear with employees about relevant ill health and capability procedures.

Responding to Disclosure

If you suspect a member of your team is experiencing poor mental health, or they disclose it to you, it's essential you have a conversation with them about their needs. This will help you to evaluate and introduce appropriate support or adjustments. To manage mental health at work effectively, you'll need good people management skills, as well as empathy and common sense. You should try to ensure you are seen as approachable, and listen when staff ask for help. You should also consider whether or not the workplace culture encourages disclosure or not.

Choose an Appropriate Place

■ It's important to make people feel comfortable; therefore, it's good to have the conversation somewhere private and quiet.
■ Sometimes a neutral space outside the workplace will help the person to feel equal and at ease.
■ If the individual is a remote worker, consider whether going to them might help.

Avoid Making Assumptions

■ It can be difficult for people to disclose information relating to their mental health, so make it easier by keeping an open mind and giving them space to talk it out.
■ Avoid trying to guess what symptoms an employee might have and how these might affect their ability to do their job.
■ Remember, many people are able to manage their condition and perform their role to a high standard.

Embed 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 team colleagues and how, as this can be very supportive for some people.

Encourage People to Talk

■ It's important to have an open dialogue with employees when discussing their mental health.
■ Remember, everyone's experience of poor mental health is different, and how you deal with a disclosure should be entirely dependent on the individual.
■ Ask how the condition manifests itself, what the implications are and what support they need.

Respond Flexibly

■ Mental distress affects people in different ways and at different times in their lives, so be prepared to adapt your support to suit the individual.

- If it works for both of you, work with your employee to develop an individual wellness action plan (WAP), as explained below.
- Remember, workplace adjustments for poor mental health need not be costly nor require huge changes.
- Be aware of the steps to take if you're concerned the employee may be having suicidal feelings – guide them to seek help from their GP or the Samaritans and consult Mind's advice on how to support people (contact details below).

Be Honest and Clear

- It's important to recognise that an employee's performance or behaviour can be affected if they are experiencing a mental health problem. If you have specific grounds for concern, such as high absence levels or impaired performance, it's important to address these at an early stage.
- The support people receive from their manager is key in determining how well and how quickly they are able to get back to peak performance.

Develop an Action Plan

- Work with your team member to develop an individual action plan.
- It's important that the plan identifies the signs of the individual's mental health problem, triggers for stress, the possible impact on their work, whom to contact in a crisis, and what support they need.
- Include an agreed time to review the support measures to check if they have been effective or whether any further adjustments are needed.
- Set a date to follow up on this action plan and set up a subsequent meeting.

Encourage People to Seek Support

- People should speak to their GP about available support from the NHS, such as talking therapies.
- If your organisation has an employee assistance programme (EAP), it may be able to arrange counselling.

- The Mind Infoline can signpost people towards support, and the network of local Mind hubs across the country can also help source advice and support.
- Be aware that problems in an employee's personal life can often have a negative effect on their mental well-being.

Reassure People

- People may not always be ready to talk straight away, so it's important that you outline what support is available.
- Reassure the individual that your door is always open and they can speak to you as their line manager at any time.
- Let them know you'll ensure they get the support they need.

Seek Advice If You Need To

- If you're still unsure, the person lacks insight or an issue is particularly complex, seek advice from expert organisations such as the CIPD, Mind, Centre for Mental Health, Mindful Employer, or your local Mind group or GP – encourage your employee to do so too.
- If available, employee assistance programmes can also help line managers and employees.
- Where workplace relationships are strained or confrontational, consider using workplace mediation to help resolve issues.
- Larger employers may find involving occupational health colleagues useful, as they can support both employees and managers to negotiate issues around disclosure.
- Remember that once aware of health or disability information, the employer also has a legal duty to consider making reasonable adjustments as well as a general duty of care and responsibility for employee health and preventing personal injury.