AMBULANCE

Supporting a colleague with a mental health problem

Blue Light Programme
Supporting a colleague with a mental health problem

This is a guide for ambulance service staff and volunteers on how to support a colleague experiencing a mental health problem.

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What is a mental health problem?

Mental health problems can affect the way you think, feel and behave. Some mental health problems are described using words that are in everyday use, for example ‘depression’ or ‘anxiety’. This can make them seem easier to understand, but can also mean people underestimate how serious they can be.

A mental health problem feels just as bad, or worse, than any other illness – only you cannot see it. Mental health problems are very common; they affect around one in four people in Britain, and are even more common among people in the ambulance service.

But there is still stigma and discrimination towards people with mental health problems, as well as many myths about what different diagnoses mean. Many people say that being discriminated against in work and social situations can be a bigger burden than the illness itself.
Our research shows:

- Ambulance service staff and volunteers are more at risk of developing a mental health issue and are less likely to seek help from their employer than the general population.
- 91% of ambulance service personnel have experienced stress and poor mental health at work.
- 45% of ambulance service personnel think that colleagues would treat them differently, in a negative way, if they disclosed a mental health problem at work.

What should I say to a colleague with a mental health problem?

If your colleague had a broken leg, you probably wouldn’t think twice about asking how they were. Anyone can experience a mental health problem, so being able to talk about it is important to us all. And you don’t need to be an expert on mental health. Often, small everyday actions can make the biggest difference.

Show your support

If you know someone has been unwell, don’t be afraid to ask how they are. They might want to talk about it, or they might not. But just letting them know they don’t have to avoid the issue with you is important. Just spending time with the person lets them know you care and can help you understand what they’re going through.
Ask how you can help

People will want support at different times in different ways, so ask how you can help. For example, if your colleague wants to get more exercise, you could do this together.

Be open-minded

Phrases like "Cheer up", "I’m sure it’ll pass" and "Pull yourself together" definitely won’t help. Be non-judgemental and listen. The person experiencing a mental health problem often knows best what is helpful for them.

Don’t just talk about mental health

Keep in mind that having a mental health problem is just one part of the person. People don’t want to be defined by their mental health problem, so keep talking about the things you have always talked about.

Show trust and respect

Mental health problems can seriously damage a person’s self-esteem, and make them feel like they are personally and professionally worthless. By showing your colleague trust and respect at work, you can help to rebuild and maintain their sense of self-esteem. This will also help you to cope, as you will hopefully see your support having a positive impact on your colleague.

Look after yourself

It is important to maintain your own mental wellbeing (see p.25) – if you become unwell you will be less able to offer support.

Be patient

You might want to know more details about your colleague’s thoughts and feelings, or want them to get help immediately. But it’s important to let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.

When I’ve had problems with my mental health or wellbeing, the most helpful thing has been the team’s acceptance of me.
How can I support a colleague to seek help for their mental health problem?

Our research shows that ambulance service personnel are more likely to seek help from a colleague than a GP, so the support you offer can be really valuable.

If a colleague lets you know that they are ready to seek help for their mental health problem, there are lots of things you can do to support them.

For example:

- **Listen.** Simply giving someone space to talk freely, without interruption or judgement, can be really helpful in itself. If they’re finding it difficult, let them know that you’re there to listen when they are ready.

- **Stay calm.** Even though it might be upsetting to hear that your colleague is distressed, try to stay calm. This will help them feel calmer too, and show them that they can talk to you openly without upsetting you.
• **Be patient.** You might want to know more details about your colleague’s thoughts and feelings, or want them to get help immediately. But it’s important to let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.

• **Try not to make assumptions.** Your perspective might be useful to your colleague, but try not to assume that you already know what may have caused their feelings, or what will help.

• **Keep social contact.** Part of the support you offer could be to keep things as normal as possible. This could include involving your colleague in social events, or chatting about other parts of your lives.

• **Learn more about the problem your colleague is experiencing,** to help you think about other ways you could support them. Our website provides lots of information about different types of mental health problems, including pages on what friends and family can do to help.
You can:

- Be patient. You won’t always know the full story, and there may be reasons why your colleague is finding it difficult to ask for help.
- Offer support and reassurance. Let them know you support them and you’ll be there if they change their mind.
- Inform them how to seek help when they’re ready. For example, you could show them our booklet on seeking help for a mental health problem, which includes details about ambulance service-specific organisations that could help.
- Look after yourself, and try not to become unwell (see p.25).

You can’t:

- Force someone to talk to you. It can take time for someone to feel able to talk openly, and putting pressure on them to talk might make them feel less comfortable telling you about their experiences.
- Force someone to get help (if they’re over 18, and are not posing immediate danger to themselves or someone else). As adults, we are all ultimately responsible for making our own decisions. This includes when – or if – we choose to seek help when we feel unwell.
- See a health care professional for someone else. A doctor might give you general information about symptoms or diagnoses, but they won’t be able to share any specific advice or details about someone else without their consent.
If you’re worried about your colleague and are not sure what to do, you can call the Mind Blue Light Infoline. Our Infoline can give you confidential, independent and practical advice to help you support your colleague.

*9am–6pm, Mon to Fri, calls charged at local rates

Call 0300 303 5999*
Text 84999
Email bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

How can I help a colleague experiencing suicidal feelings?

Suicidal feelings can be frightening and painful for the person who is experiencing them, as well as for those around them. If a colleague is experiencing suicidal feelings, here are some things you can do:

**Try not to judge**

If someone you know is thinking about taking their own life, it’s understandable to feel shocked, frightened or angry. However, it’s important to try not to judge that person or blame them for the way they are feeling. Often, finding someone who is prepared to listen and be supportive is the first step towards a person seeking help.

**Talk to the person about how they feel**

If you think someone is suicidal, one of the most important things you can do is to talk to them about how they feel and be there to listen. Even just giving them time to talk by listening and reflecting back what they have said can be very helpful.
The thing I find most helpful, is just knowing someone is there. Sometimes just listening to someone drivel on about mundane things. Sometimes talking about how I feel – just simply saying to someone I feel suicidal.

It’s okay to ask someone about their suicidal feelings. Talking about suicide will not put the idea into their head, but will encourage them to talk about their feelings.

It’s understandable that you may feel pressure ‘to say the right thing’, but remember by just being there and listening in a compassionate way, you are helping that person to feel less isolated and frightened.

Encourage them to get help

Even when someone appears to be absolutely determined to take their own life, it is important to explore every possible option and source of support with them. You could talk to them about the idea of getting help and ask them how they feel about this. By doing this, you can start to encourage them to get support. This may be by going to see a therapist or a counsellor. See our booklet on seeking help for a mental health problem for ideas on where to start.
Ask how you can help

Someone may know what helps them or what has worked in the past. If they know, they can tell you what it is. If they don’t, you could have a conversation with them about what you can do and perhaps write a support plan together. It is important they agree to the help you offer.

Help them stay safe

If someone is feeling suicidal and talks to you about intending to end their life, stay with them. Remove anything that could cause harm, such as sharp objects.

Help them think about positive things

Exploring reasons for living can be a positive way of supporting someone who is feeling suicidal.

Even when I’ve been in the midst of despair and unable to see any way forward, being reminded that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary state of affairs has helped me focus on the hope that all things pass.

Look out for warning signs

It can be very difficult to recognise when someone is intending to take their own life; a suicide attempt can seem to come suddenly, and sometimes the person might go to great lengths to hide these feelings. If someone often experiences suicidal feelings, they may know their own warning signs and might be able to tell you what these are or write them down. This could help you to look out for the signs in the future.

Warning signs to watch out for include:

- stressful events at work
- experiencing bereavement or loss
- feelings of shame
- isolation or loneliness
- loss of self-esteem
- sleep problems
- use of suicide-promoting websites
- someone taking less care of themselves, for example eating badly or not caring what they look like
- a sense of uselessness and having no purpose – feeling "What’s the point?"
• someone talking about ending their life or about suicide in general

• a marked change of behaviour – someone may appear to be calm and at peace for the first time or, more usually, may be withdrawn and have difficulty communicating.

If you’re worried that someone is at immediate risk of taking their own life, you should stay with that person and take one of the following steps:

• encourage them to ring the Samaritans, 116 123, open 24 hours a day

• contact their GP for an emergency appointment or the out of hours service

• ring 999 or NHS direct on 111

• go to the nearest A&E department.

If someone has attempted suicide, you should ring 999 and stay with them until the ambulance arrives.
How can I look after myself?

Supporting someone experiencing a mental health problem can be stressful. Making sure that you look after your own wellbeing can mean that you have the energy, time and distance to help someone else. For example:

- **Take a break when you need it.** If you’re feeling overwhelmed by supporting someone or it’s taking up a lot of time or energy, taking some time for yourself can help you feel refreshed.

- **Talk to someone you trust about how you’re feeling.** You may want to be careful about how much information you share about the person you’re supporting, but talking about your own feelings to a friend can help you feel supported too.

- **Be realistic about what you can do and don’t take too much on.** Your support is really valuable, but it’s up to your colleague to seek support for themselves. Remember that small, simple things can help, and that just being there for them is probably helping lots.

For more ideas about how to keep yourself well, see our booklet on how to manage your mental wellbeing.
Bradley’s story

I am 33 years old and I have worked in the ambulance service since 2008. I started as a member of A&E support. I progressed onto the student paramedic programme and qualified as a paramedic in 2011. I now work as a solo responder in a Fast Response Unit.

I was involved in a number of stressful events last year. One of these was an investigation at work. Shortly after this, my son was born. He was born unwell, and my wife and I watched as they resuscitated him. I had to take time off work to cope with the events. The doctor eventually diagnosed me with stress, some of it being work-related.

The colleagues I work with on a daily basis have been very helpful and full of support. It makes a difference just knowing that they are there when you need to have a chat about things. For example, I have a very good friend at work who would call me on a regular basis and ask if I was okay. I called him the day I felt that I couldn’t take it anymore and needed help. He arranged for me to see a manager and to get more help.
I also have a few work friends who live nearby and we would meet on a regular basis for coffee and to chat about things, and about how I was getting on.

The added benefit was that, in my trust, there is counselling available to staff when they need it. I took up this offer myself, and I’m not embarrassed that I accessed this support. I would 100% recommend anyone going through a tough time to take up a similar service. For me, what helped was that I was able to talk to someone independent and non-judgemental.

What wasn’t helpful was the length of time that it took for the managers to realise that there was something wrong with a member of staff when they needed some support. I think that management at all levels should receive training on looking out for staff who are potentially having a hard time with their mental health. The training should include early warning signs and what they can do to start helping. The training should then be rolled out to the rest of the service staff to help look after our colleagues.

Mental health is hard to deal with because there isn’t enough training and information out there. This is why I have decided to share my story with the Mind Blue Light Programme. It’s important for people to know that asking for help isn’t a sign of weakness, and you shouldn’t feel embarrassed to ask for it if you need it.

Depending on your trust, there are support mechanisms available to staff. There is counselling, LINC and occupational health. Just speaking to your colleagues in the mess room and letting off steam before or after your shift can make a huge difference as well.

And if you’ve got a colleague who experiences a mental health problem, and you’re not sure what to do or say, my advice would be to just let that person know that you are there if they need to talk or go for a coffee. Don’t push for information or details if the person isn’t ready to talk about it. Let them know that there is support available when they are ready.
Useful contacts

Mind Blue Light Infoline

0300 303 5999
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm, local rates)
text: 84999
bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk
mind.org.uk/bluelight

The Blue Light Infoline offers confidential, independent and practical support, advice and signposting around mental health and wellbeing. The Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families, to help keep you or those you care about well for work.

NHS 111

Call: 111

Advice in England when you need medical help fast but it’s not an emergency.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK
Chris PO Box 90 90
Stirling FK8 2SA
24-hour helpline (free-to-call): 116 123
jo@samaritans.org
samaritans.org

24-hour emotional support for anyone struggling to cope.

This is a shortened version of the original text.
For the full online version, visit mind.org.uk/BlueLightBooklets

Give us your feedback
Email bluelight@mind.org.uk if you have any feedback on this booklet.
References available on request
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We’re Mind, the mental health charity.

We won’t give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

mind.org.uk/BlueLight

bluelight@mind.org.uk

Mind Blue Light Infoline:
0300 303 5999 (Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm, local rates), or text: 84999

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