



Managing conversations around mental health

Blue Light Programme
mind.org.uk/bluelight



Managing conversations about mental wellbeing

- **Find a quiet place** with an informal atmosphere, perhaps in a café or over a coffee – this shouldn't feel like a formal interview.
- **Actively listen to the person**, by giving them your undivided attention. Try to leave any questions or comments you may have until the person has finished so you don't interrupt them. Once a person knows they are being given the space and time to talk, they will.
 - Sometimes when someone takes the courage to talk to you it may not be possible for you to give them the time they need there and then. You will be the best judge of this. Remember to always show you recognise that they have taken a positive step by speaking to you, explain why you cannot talk now and arrange a better time to have the conversation. If someone is in urgent need of help always signpost immediately to support, you may want to help them go to the Mind website. Click the yellow button at the top which says 'I need urgent help' or call the Samaritans 08457 90 90 90 - Lines are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
- **Use positive body language**, and encourage the person to continue with small verbal comments like 'I see' or 'what happened next?'. This will let them know that you are paying attention to what they are saying and actively listening to them.
- **Check your understanding** by paraphrasing what the person has said back to them.
- **Reflect back actual words they have used to them**, as this can encourage them to open up more. For example, a good reflection to 'I just feel so alone' could be 'alone?'.
- **Respond by using empathetic statements** such as: "I appreciate this must be difficult for you..."
- **Avoid clichés**. Comments like 'Pull yourself together' or 'You're just having a bad day' are not helpful.
- **Dispel any myths**. Mental health problems are more common than people think and can affect anyone at any time.



Image: Metropolitan Police

- **Try to avoid asking too many questions**, especially questions that only require a 'yes' or 'no' answer, or that begin with the word 'why'. Ask open questions to invite a more detailed response:
 - Tell me how you're feeling?
 - How do you look after yourself?
 - What support do you have in place?
- **Reassure them that it is positive that they want to talk about their experience**, what's happening with them, or that they are looking for support (if this is the case).
- **Is the individual aware of sources of support?** Signpost to further information and support. It may be helpful to ask the person: "What would you like to happen in this situation?" This will help to empower them and encourage them to take the course of action that seems right to them. Be clear about what you can do, as well as what you can't.
- **The important thing is to listen**, rather than give advice, the individual needs to be able to act for themselves. Signpost the individual to sources of support, rather than telling them what you think is best. Take a look at the 'Managing boundaries' section above for more information on this.

Encouraging people to talk about mental health

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Starting a conversation can be a powerful way to challenge mental health stigma and get people to think about their perceptions. For all of us, our mental health is just as important as our physical health. Talking helps us all recognise this and can dispel misconceptions about mental health problems and the people who experience them.

You don't need to be an expert to talk about mental health.

"I've also heard people talking about depression as though it's just an excuse to get off work. Hearing that in your work environment doesn't encourage people to be open about mental health - but talking about it helps me and others, and that's what I'm pushing for now."

Helen, Police

You could:

- Make time to ask how a colleague is doing.
- Chat to colleagues informally about mental health. You can talk about the Blue Light Programme and related support.
- Organise an event or campaign that encourages people to start talking about mental health.
- Use our resources - distribute Blue Light materials with anti-stigma facts and messages.

Speaking Up and championing a cause you feel passionately about can be very empowering. However, it's important to only discuss mental health in the workplace when you feel comfortable to do so. Don't be disheartened if you get a negative reaction. **Remember: starting the conversation is a vital step towards challenging stigma.**



How can I start a conversation about mental health?

- Talk about the Blue Light Programme and why you're supporting our work.
- Start with a fact, for example: one in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem in any given year. Anyone can experience a mental health problem.
- Ask someone how they are doing, and take time to listen and engage with their response.
- If you have your own personal experience of mental health problems, and if it feels right for you, and you know how much of your story you want to share, you can talk about this personal experience with your colleagues or team.
- Talk about what helps you maintain wellbeing, relax or de-stress. Ask your colleagues what helps them.
- Use news stories related to mental health to start a discussion.
- Share some of the Blue Light Programme's findings³ from our survey of more than 3,000 emergency services staff and volunteers, which show...
 1. Almost nine out of ten respondents have experienced stress, low mood or poor mental health at some point whilst working for the emergency services.
 2. Eight out of ten respondents think colleagues would be more comfortable talking about physical health than mental health.
 3. Half of respondents are not aware of the mental health support their organisation offers.

Tips for talking

- **Think about what you want to say and when:** You don't need to be an expert to talk about mental health, but you might find it helpful to think about what you want to say in advance. It might help to say it out loud or to a friend first. This will help you hear how it sounds and notice how it makes you feel. Also think through where and when you may want to start a conversation. For example, if you want to ask a colleague how they are feeling, make sure you have time to listen to the response and are not likely to be interrupted.
- **Less can be more:** Our mental health is as much a part of us as our physical health, but the stigma surrounding mental health can make it hard for some people to talk about it. Keeping it bite sized and asking open questions can help you make headway.
- **Give them time:** Your colleague may simply not wish to engage with the subject straight away, or they might initially react in a negative or dismissive way. Give them time and this may change, even if it's not right away. And take opportunities to talk when these present themselves. If someone asks you about mental health or the Blue Light Programme, take the opportunity to have an open conversation.
- **Have some information ready:** Sometimes people want to find out more in their own time – why not have some of **our materials** to hand? The person you are talking to might have lots of questions and want more information.
- **You may get different reactions:** These could be positive or negative and may be hard to predict. Think about how you will keep to your boundaries. What parts of your story do you want to share and what do you not want to share? Have information to hand in case a colleague has questions. Your colleague may join in at first, but then become uncomfortable and change the topic – if this happens don't be disheartened. It's still helpful that the first step has taken place.
- **Courage is contagious:** Often, once the subject of mental health is out in the open, people want to talk. Your first conversation could prompt many more.

3. Mind ran an online survey to better understand experiences of mental health problems within the emergency services in late 2014. Approximately 1.5% of all emergency services staff and volunteers (3,627 people) responded.



Image: West Midlands Police

“Since I have spoken out, other colleagues including senior officers have told me how they went through that 20 years ago or whatever it was. It’s comforting to know that I’m not the only one, that people do get through it and progress.”

Richard, Fire Service

“I’ve never had one negative reaction. People react with empathy, and often disclose that either they, a family member or a friend has suffered from mental illness. How stupid is it to think that people who work in the blue light services, who deal with all the bad things in society, are immune from mental illness? We are not, and there is no shame in that.”

Ed Simpson, Police

“Many colleagues in the team are also friends, so it felt natural to talk to them about it. No one judges me and they all trust me to do a good job. To my team mates, my mental health problems were never an issue; except when I was unwell, and in those situations they would offer support because they cared about me. They see me as someone who is equally part of the team and defined by what I do there, not by any mental health problems.”

Izzy, Mountain Rescue

And remember, the main message to get across is...

We’re all human. We all have mental health. Talking about it makes a big difference.



Closing conversations about mental health

- Sometimes conversations will come to a natural end. However if this does not happen give the person a gentle indication that the conversation needs to come to an end. You could say something like: "It's been good to talk, we've covered a lot and we will have to wrap up soon because I have a meeting." Or whatever you feel is appropriate.
- Summarise your conversation and anything you have both agreed to do. For example: "You have told me that you are going to speak to your GP about how you are feeling, and I will text you by the end of the day with the details of how to access counselling sessions through our Employee Assistance Programme."
- Ask practical questions such as 'Is there going to be someone there when you get home?' or 'Is there a friend you can go and see?'
- Remember offering a 'listening ear' and showing your acceptance, warmth and regard will go a long way to help someone. It may not be possible to get a clear idea of the next steps the person will take as a result of talking to you. Ending the conversation by inviting them to take some time to reflect on what has been discussed and to consider what they may want to do going forward could be the best way to bring the conversation to a close, especially if you feel that there is nothing more you can say at that time.
- If you feel it would be helpful, and you are able to commit to giving more of your time in this way, you may want to arrange another time to meet up and talk.

The Mind Blue Light Infoline

0300 303 5999

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.

Contact the Infoline

Lines are open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday (except for bank holidays).

Telephone: 0300 303 5999 (local rates)

Email: bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

Text: 84999



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

 @MindCharity #mybluelight

 Mind

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