

## Section 1: Supporting colleagues

### Encouraging people to talk about mental health

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 findings<sup>3</sup> 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.**



**“In the fire service, we are exposed to some tragic, horrible incidents. But you can keep on top of those situations. The ability to talk about a problem with someone makes a world of difference. It’s amazing. Just talking about it can almost release some of it out of your body. And if you keep bottling it up it will come out in the end.”**

Andrew, Fire Service

## Help with Speaking Up

If you have your own personal experience of mental health problems you may wish to speak about these to an audience of your colleagues.

If you don't have own personal experience of mental health problems, you can find opportunities to talk to colleagues about the importance of challenging mental health stigma and promoting wellbeing.

**“If we manage to save one life it’s worth it, isn’t it?”**

David, Ambulance Service

To support you in this, we are running a number of regional workshops. Once you have registered as a Blue Light Champion, we'll send you more information and dates for your diary.

**“My advice to those who are having problems with their mental health or wellbeing would be to be as open as possible about what you are going through – it is not anything to be ashamed of. Try all avenues for help and support and keep trying until you find something that works. It can be a long, hard battle but you can come through it.”**

Izzy, Mountain Rescue

## Key messages

As a Blue Light Champion you will be challenging the stigma around mental health in the workplace. Here are some key messages to support you in doing this.

### Messages about mental health:

- We're all human and we all have mental health
- Mental health is just as important as physical health
- Mental health problems are common and can be treated
- It helps to talk about mental health, but it can take courage. Just asking 'how are you?' – and taking time to listen properly to the response – can make an enormous difference
- We all need support sometimes
- Look out for signs of unmanageable stress in you and a colleague: what could you do to take care of yourself?
- The effects of dealing with stressful situations every day can build up over time. Through their role individuals can be constantly exposed to traumatic situations, either in person or through their support for colleagues, where they need to 'stay strong' for others. This can include moving on to the next situation without knowing what happens after their involvement is over.

**“We teach officers how to protect their bodies from physical harm. What we don’t do is help them to protect their minds and ultimately their mental wellbeing.”**

Ed, Police

## Messages specifically about the support on offer from Mind and the Blue Light Programme

- Mind has set up the Blue Light Programme to improve support for staff and volunteers who work in the emergency services.
- Mind’s research shows emergency services workers are more likely than the general population to experience mental health problems, because of the nature of your role and exposure to traumatic situations. But you are also less likely to seek support.
- Find out more about the Blue Light Programme in Appendix 1.

**“I know many people who have got stress, depression, anxiety or possible early signs of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) who will not say they’ve got anything wrong with them. I want to help those people get to where I am – to tell them to move on, get treatment, keep going, don’t give up. That just because you’re ill doesn’t make you less of a person and it doesn’t mean you can’t do the job.”**

Zoe, Police

## Finding the words

Finding the ‘right’ language to describe emergency services staff and volunteers’ experiences of mental health problems will always be difficult. There is no one term or set of terms that everyone will agree on. We have worked together with emergency services staff and volunteers to identify words that are likely to resonate and that employees and volunteers will feel most comfortable using. The term ‘mental health problem’, as well as some of the specific diagnostic names (for example depression, bipolar disorder, etc) are widely used and understood by people outside of ‘the mental health world’, which is why we use them.

We respect that some people reject any form of label, and some don’t see their experiences as an illness or a problem at all. Conversely, we also respect that some people find their experience best understood in terms of illness, and find a medical diagnosis a useful way of talking about, and getting support for what they are going through. Within the Blue Light Programme, there are many people with personal experience of mental health problems who have diverse points of view.

We don’t see our role, or yours as a Blue Light Champion, as being to decide which of these points of view is ‘right’, or to tell anyone what language they should use to talk about their own experiences. It is up to you to choose language that you feel comfortable with and feel is appropriate. What we do ask is that you are mindful of the language you use and think about how those around you may feel about it.





## Signposting to support

You may want to find out about and promote the support currently available within your service and local area so you can help people find the help they need. Being prepared with this information means you can direct your colleagues to support while maintaining boundaries and ensuring you do not take on too much.

We have created an editable list of support around mental health that you can refer to or show colleagues. Please create your own tailored version by adding to this with contact details of support offered in your service and local area such as:

- Your Employee Assistance Programme
- How to get in touch with Occupational Health
- Information available from unions and other membership bodies
- Disability support groups
- Details of external organisations, such as your local Mind
- Peer support groups within your organisation and local area
- How to access talking treatments in your local area
- Local and national helplines

[Click here](#) for editable lists of useful contacts (in Appendix 3).

**“The doctors referred me to NHS Mental Health, who diagnosed me with PTSD. I got signed off work for about seven months. Occupational Health at work were really good and referred me for eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing therapy, using buzzers and lights. It’s bizarre but it’s amazing – it works. It was fascinating.”**

**Zoe, Police**