

How to have difficult conversations: talking about mental health

Most of us will experience some sort of mental health difficulty at some stage in our lives. With appropriate support and treatment, the majority will be able to continue to work within pharmacy roles, and the mental health difficulties they are facing are likely to be resolved.

However, some people may be afraid of stigma, lack the know-how, or otherwise be afraid to seek help when they are suffering. They may push themselves to try and work through their mental health difficulties, inadvertently making things more difficult for themselves.

This resource aims to help you notice the signs of someone who is suffering and give you the confidence to talk to and support them.

Be proactive.

It's important to foster a safe environment where team members know they can speak openly and expect to be treated without stigma or discrimination should they need mental health support.

This could be through regularly demonstrating positive and open behaviours and attitudes to mental health and dedicating time for team mental health training and workshops, such as those available through our [Wardley Wellbeing Service](#).

Within this training, you may want to come up with a team commitment on how to approach and support colleagues who may show signs that they are suffering. You could also schedule routine catch ups to allow time for finding out how colleagues are doing in general, including those you line manage.

If you're in a leadership position, you may consider developing clear strategies and policies to make sure team members who are experiencing poor mental health get the support they need straight away.

Know their signs.

It is worth getting to know your colleagues so that you can spot what may be a change from their regular behaviour at work. It's important not to jump to conclusions about people's mental health, however, certain behaviours could indicate that a colleague may be struggling.

These could be changes in their regular habits and routines; a drop in their productivity, focus and motivation levels; changes in how they interact with their colleagues and patients; finding it difficult to organise their workload, make decisions or problem solve; or appearing down, withdrawn, detached, tired, anxious or displaying other unusual or unpredictable behaviour.



Open up a dialogue.

The first step in supporting someone you think may be going through mental health difficulties is to recognise who is the best person to help them. If you're not their manager or you don't have a close friendship, the best course of action is to report your concerns to the most appropriate person.

If you are in a position to open up a dialogue, remain positive, empathetic and supportive. Ensure the timing and setting is appropriate so that your colleague feels comfortable and safe. Avoid making assumptions and asking direct questions about their mental health. Something like 'I noticed you seem more tired than usual recently, would you like to talk about it?', can help to get the conversation started.

Often, many of us brush off such questions with "yes I'm fine – just got a lot on". It's important not to push if they don't want to talk. However, responding with 'I'm here to support whenever you need' and letting them know you'll check back in with them in a few days, can help your colleague feel supported and encourage them to open up if they need to.

Be prepared for a reaction you weren't expecting. Some people may become defensive or even angry when asked about their mental health. If this happens, stay calm and respond in a way which demonstrates your genuine care, such as 'I'm sorry I upset you, I just want you to know that I'm here for you if you ever need me.'

Listen with intent.

If your colleague decides to open up to you, it's important that you let them explain their struggles in their own words.

You may want to ask open ended questions about how their mental health problem manifests itself, what the triggers may be, how it impacts their work and daily life, what the solutions could be and what support they may need from you/your workplace.

If they tell you what type of support they need, and you are able to offer it, ensure you follow through.

It could be a good idea to form an action plan together so that you can have regular catch ups to see if agreed steps and support measures are working. If necessary, you'll need to have further conversations about reducing their workload or arranging time off sick from work. You may also need to create an action plan to support them whilst they recover and when they return to work.

If you are able to, it can help to reassure your colleague that your discussions are in confidence. Unless there is cause for concern, such as patient risk or the intent to self-harm, the offer of confidentiality may help a colleague to feel they can share what is happening for them.

Consider long- term support.

Remember that some mental health problems may require long-term support.

As well as continued support from you and your organisation, it's a good idea to gently encourage your colleague to seek further, professional help. This could be through your workplace Occupational Health, their GP or through counselling, such as our [free and confidential Counselling service](#).

