

Managing conversations about mental wellbeing

As an Employee Champion, you may find colleagues start to share their experience of mental health problems with you. Here are some tips for managing these conversations.

Such a situation might be new to you, or you may have lots, or some experience of managing sensitive conversations because of your job role. The suggestions that follow are based on what we've learned can work well.

Remember, each conversation will be different

Think about the individual situation and person, one person may simply want to tell you their story, whereas someone else may be telling you as a first step to seeking support. Exploring why your colleague is starting the conversation will help shape how you manage it.

Key guidance: Managing conversations in which a colleague discloses that they are struggling with their mental health.

- **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.
- **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.

Remember: conversations can trigger painful memories

Listening to others experiences that are close to your own may trigger thoughts about your experience of mental health problems or traumatic events you have encountered. Think about how you might look after your own wellbeing as an Employee Champion and remember your health comes first. If you do not feel able to continue the role for any reason, you can stop at any time.

- **Dispel any myths.** Mental health problems are more common than people think and can affect anyone at any time.
- **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.

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.

When someone wants to talk and you don't have the time

Once a person knows they are being given the space and time to talk, they will. But 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.

Sharing your story

You may find that colleagues tell you about their own thoughts, feelings, experiences and concerns, as part of seeking support around their own mental health.

If you have your own personal experience of mental health problems, you may choose to share this as a way of supporting your colleague. There is absolutely no requirement to share your story as an Employee Champion. We recognise this is a big and very personal decision.

When is it helpful to tell your story?

A colleague tells you they think they may have PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and you have had a similar experience, it may be useful for you to explain how you sought help and what worked for you. However, it may not be helpful to talk at length and in detail about the sensitive details of your own story; while you may have experienced something similar, the circumstances and feelings will not be exactly the same and may be overwhelming for the other person. A good question to ask yourself is, how will this person benefit from hearing about my own experience?

Remember: ultimately, it's down to you and the policy of your organisation

Communication is a very personal thing so use what feels right for you based on your experience of managing sensitive conversations. Our suggestions are not intended to take the place of your organisation's policies and guidelines, and we urge you to always seek out and be guided by the information and support your service provides before starting conversations about mental wellbeing. The Time to Change Employers team are unable to give advice to Champions on individual services' policies.