

how to have a supportive conversation

If you are a manager of young workers, it is important to be able to talk about mental health in a supportive way. NIP stands for Notice, Inquire, Plan. It is a helpful acronym to remember what to do when you want to talk to a young worker about their mental health.

Notice

If a young worker is beginning to struggle with their mental health, there are signs that a colleague or manager might notice.

Possible early warning signs are easier to spot when you know how an employee usually behaves, interacts, and feels. Noticing a change from what is normal for them is important.

What you might notice - indicators of possible distress in the workplace

Behavioural

Are they...?

- quieter or more withdrawn than usual?
- not taking part in meetings or workplace banter like they usually do?
- less productive, making mistakes or struggling to meet the demands of work?
- taking more time off, coming in late?
- seeming less motivated, forgetful, or distracted, having trouble following instructions?
- having more trouble getting along with others?

Physical

Are they...?

- tired at work? Sleep and energy are often impacted by mental health difficulties
- unwell more often, for example with colds, stomach upsets or headaches? Sometimes our physical health suffers when we are feeling stressed
- behaving, dressing, or appearing different suddenly?

Emotional

How someone is feeling is not always easy to observe and a supportive discussion might be required to understand the young worker's emotions. How do they say they feel?

Are they...?

- having more trouble managing work stress?
- more sensitive to criticism?
- more easily overwhelmed?
- more irritable?
- less confident?
- seeming sad or anxious?

It is important to understand that warning signs do not necessarily indicate that a worker has mental health problems. They are indicators that there *may* be something going wrong for them and that it *might* be time for you to instigate a conversation to find out more and help them to find the support that they require.

Inquire

Now that you have noticed some warning signs it is time to have a conversation with your young worker.

Preparing for a supportive conversation about mental health

Think about a good time and place to have a conversation that could be about sensitive topics: make sure you both have enough time and that the place is private.

Be prepared that they may not feel ready to talk. Discussing personal struggles can be hard, especially at work. Consider whether you are the best person to have this conversation with them? Is there someone else that they might prefer to talk with?

It's a good idea to check whether your workplace has a policy or procedure that provides guidance on how to have supportive conversations about mental health. If your workplace has a HR department, consider having a confidential chat with them about how to best support the young worker.

Starting the conversation

Ensure the young worker understands that you would like to talk to them because you are concerned, and that this is not a performance management conversation. Being summoned to a meeting with a manager when you are struggling can create additional stress. You can assist this by being clear about the goals of the conversation.

Here's how you might like to approach it:

- Ask, 'How have things been going for you lately?'
- Comment on the changes that you've noticed and let them know you're concerned for them.
- Be relaxed in your approach. You don't want them to feel like they're under investigation or that this is related to their performance at work.

Here are some examples:

- 'I've noticed that I'm happy to talk or listen and see if I can help.'
- 'I'm a bit worried about you, I've noticed How are things?'
- 'Lately you seem What is happening for you? We can work it out together if that would help.'

Respond appropriately

If the person decides to open up, affirm their choice to talk about their mental health and acknowledge it can be a hard step to take.

Avoid saying things like 'look on the bright side' as it might make them feel misunderstood. Instead, you could say things like:

- 'That sounds really stressful/difficult. How can I help?'
- 'Thank you for telling me. I know it can be hard to open up.'
- 'It sounds like it's really important for you to get some support with all this.'

The young worker may choose not to open up and they are not obliged to disclose a mental health difficulty unless it impacts their work role. It's important to respect the young worker's decision and avoid becoming intrusive. Be clear about what you need to do from here.

For example:

- 'You have said you don't want help and I respect that; I am still a bit worried though, so I am going to... (check in again, talk to someone else)'
- 'Do you have a GP you can talk to?' or 'Is there someone else on the team that you would feel comfortable to talk with?'

It's important to ask for the young workers permission before talking to someone else about their mental health. In situations where you are required to share their information, be transparent with the young worker about your responsibilities and include them in the process as much as possible.

Plan

Following a conversation, you can make a plan in collaboration with the young worker about what should come next. Consider the steps that can be taken in and outside of the workplace so that they get the support that they require.

When planning what to do next it can be helpful to consider the following questions:

- What are the next steps?
- Who is responsible?
- Who else should be involved?

Steps that can be taken in the workplace

There will be adjustments that can be made at work to support their wellbeing. The [Beyond Blue Heads Up](#) resource has some suggestions on working with a mental health condition ([headsup.org.au](#)).

Consider what simple changes can be made to support them in the workplace. For example, they might need some adjustments to their role, flexible start, finish or break times, or to plan a period of leave. If you have access to an Employee Assistance Program you could suggest this as an option.

Where to next? Seeking help outside of work

Sometimes lifestyle changes like increasing exercise, sleep or eating better will help. The worker might benefit from encouragement to take breaks, or to reconnect to activities that bring them pleasure. It might be a good time to encourage them to reach out to loved ones and let them know that they are struggling, or they might like to seek some external assistance from a counsellor.

If the difficulties are more significant and beginning to have an impact on the worker's functioning, they should be encouraged to access a support service or healthcare provider to discuss their situation.

There are several options for next steps outside of work.

- A GP is often a good place to begin. They will know local service providers and can help to sort out the right place to go.
- If the person is 25 or under, they can [contact their local headspace centre](#) ([headspace.org.au/headspace-centres](#)).
- [ehespace](#) provides free online and telephone support for young people (12-25 years) and their families and friends ([headspace.org.au/ehespace](#)).

If it is an emergency and assistance is needed urgently they can go to the local emergency department or call 000. They could also call Lifeline 13 11 14 or Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800.



For more information on what you can do to support young employees at work, check out [headspace.org.au/employers](#)