

Leader's Guide: How to Start a Conversation about Mental Health

People are silently struggling with their mental health, but are often too afraid to seek help. **As a leader, it's important to start a conversation about mental health in order to normalize it.** It not only encourages your staff to seek help earlier, but also builds a team culture with safe and open communication which is essential to staff engagement and wellbeing. However, many leaders may not feel comfortable starting a conversation about mental health. We are here to help. You don't need special training to have an open and sincere conversation about mental health. It's a skill you can develop like any other.

Goal: This guide will arm you with the knowledge and skills you need to confidently talk about mental health with your team and promote a culture of compassion and empathy. The more you practice these tips, the more confident you will be.

Expressing Care:

Start by expressing your care followed by an observation.

For example:

"I care about you and how you are doing. I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately. Would you like to go for a walk?"

"The other day I noticed you seemed upset. I made a note that I wanted to talk with you. I'm worried about how you're doing and wanted to check-in. Whenever you have time, can we grab some coffee and talk about it?"

Show Support:

In your own way, make sure they know you're there with them and that you care. Be sure to let them know you are listening.

For example:

"I'm right here with you. Nothing you're going through changes how I feel about you, and how awesome I think you are."

"I really care about you, and I want you to know you can tell me anything."

Open up:

Open up about your own story but be sure to keep it short. The purpose of sharing your experience is for them to open up about theirs.

For example:

"I've had times in my life when I've struggled. I went to talk to someone and used an online resource recommended to me. Both really helped me understand what was happening to me."

"I've been through things in my life, too, and I've found that talking about it helped me feel less alone. I wasn't open to talking about it at first, but then found an anonymous online community that allowed me to read and share my experience and feelings with others."

Tip Sheet: How to Start a Conversation about Mental Health

Ask how they are coping:

Find out how long they have been feeling this way, and any changes it's caused in their life.

For example:

"How long have you felt this way? When did these feelings start?"

"Have these thoughts led to any specific changes in your life, like trouble sleeping or keeping up with work?"

"How did that make you feel when that happened?"

It's okay to talk about it:

They may feel embarrassed to talk about what they are going through. Help assure them that's not true. Everyone experiences struggles with their mental health.

For example:

"You know what? Everyone goes through periods in their life when they're struggling. But just because you're struggling now doesn't mean you'll always feel this way."



Talking to someone else:

They may not be comfortable sharing with you (their manager), so offer to connect them with someone else.

For example:

"Is talking to me about this helping you right now? Or is there someone else you'd feel more comfortable with, who we can bring in to help support you?"

Relate to a public figure:

There is still a lot of stigma around mental health. To help, reference public figures who have been open about their struggles with mental health.

For example:

"You're in good company: a lot of the highest-performing executives and athletes lean on mental health professionals to help them hone their performance. Reaching out for professional guidance and therapy is a strong thing to do, and it can make all the difference."

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Stop and try again:

It's important to stop a conversation if it's not going well. It doesn't have to be the end of it though. You can try again at a later time.

For example:

"I'm sorry, I feel like I can do this better. Can I try this conversation again at a later time?"

Help them connect:

The hardest step is to get help. Offer to help them connect in whatever way you're comfortable with. Be sure to have resource contact information readily available.

For example:

"There's a lot of different, confidential mental health supports for you. It's helped me so maybe it can help you too."



Privacy Concerns:

If the person is worried about others finding out that they're getting help, let them know you understand and that the resources are confidential.

For example:

"I understand your concern and I use to think that as well but I learned that mental health support actually has even greater confidentiality safeguards than physical health treatment."

If they refuse help:

Not everyone is ready right away. If they refuse your suggestion of professional help (and if they aren't in immediate danger, i.e. that they are not presently self-harming or about to), be patient and don't push too hard.

For example:

"It's okay that it doesn't sound like you're ready yet. I really hope you'll think about it. Just let me know if you change your mind, and I can help you connect with someone."

"I know you're going through a lot, and I really believe it can make a big difference in your life, and your health. Just consider it for later, and know I'm here to help."

"If you're not ready to go in and meet with someone in person, there are confidential hotlines available to you for support."

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Important Note: Before you start

- There's no one right way of expressing things – the main thing is to be thoughtful and genuine
- You don't need to have all the answers – it's about having the conversation and the support you offer by talking
- If what you say doesn't sound quite right, stop and try again. It doesn't have to be the end of the conversation
- Be aware of your body language. To show you're listening, try to maintain eye contact and sit in a relaxed position

About Starling Minds

Starling Minds™ is a digital mental health platform that delivers immediate, unlimited, and personalized support and training for stress, anxiety, burnout and depression. Based on the principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Starling's leading iCBT platform is powered by an expert system that emulates the processes and practices of human-guided therapy to remove the greatest barriers preventing employees from accessing affordable and effective mental health care—cost, access, and stigma.

Learn more at starlingminds.com.