

Leader's Guide: How to Talk to Someone in a Crisis

Managing an employee who is going through a stressful period is one of the real challenges all leaders face. Most of us try to keep work and home separate, but often personal and professional lives collide and how you handle these situations with your staff member is often a test of your leadership. No leader or manager wants to worry about the possibility of a crisis, but they do happen. This does not mean that you have to feel powerless.

Goal: Use these helpful tips to navigate these sensitive conversations with more confidence. **If you are not sure if someone is going through a crisis, listen to your gut and take the action needed to support the individual.**



Do these things:

1. Tell them you're there to listen and help them find the next step.

"I'm here to listen and I really want to help you. I'm not a trained counselor or doctor, but I'll do my best to put you on the right path."

2. Practice empathy by considering the needs of people different than yourself, especially those in vulnerable populations.

3. Pause to reflect on what they have told you and share back your understanding, showing them that they've been heard

4. Mirror back what you're hearing in your own words rather than repeating what they've told you

"I just lost my job and I don't know what to do. I have small kids and I don't know if I'll be able to get food on the table. I have no idea if I even qualify for EI."

- **Helpful answer (mirroring):** "I'm hearing you say that you're feeling very overwhelmed with all the uncertainty, and not knowing how to apply for EI is even more frustrating."
- **Unhelpful answer (repeating):** "I'm hearing you say that you're worried about going hungry."

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5. Validate their feelings and concerns.

"I'm worried about my son, who lives with a mental illness and doesn't have secure housing. What if he catches this virus?"

- **Helpful answer:** "I can tell that you care about your son very much. It can be hard not to run through the worst-case scenarios."
- **Unhelpful answer:** "Everyone feels stressed right now. I have two elderly parents, and they have trouble even using a cellphone."

6. Ask if it's OK to connect the person with other helpful resources

7. Provide specific websites and phone numbers.

8. Make sure the resources you're directing people to are currently available.

9. When possible, connect the person directly to the resource.



Do not do these things:

1. Give advice or attempt to solve the problem.

2. Presume you know what the person is thinking or how they are feeling.

3. Try to relate by sharing your own experience. That will just minimize their suffering.

4. Ask leading or "why" questions

"I'm exhausted and I can't fall asleep at night. I'm working full time, my kids are at home, and my parents are elderly. I don't know how long I can keep doing this."

- **Helpful answer (open ended):** "That does sound exhausting. I'm wondering what was most helpful for you in the past when you've been exhausted and overwhelmed?"
- **Unhelpful answer (why):** "Why do you think you can't sleep?"
- **Unhelpful answer (leading):** "When you can't sleep, have you tried this cool meditation app?"

5. Provide resources you aren't sure are relevant or credible.

6. Accept hostility, threats, or abusive language. Calmly ask them to call back when they are ready to speak respectfully

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Techniques to De-escalate a Crisis

When a mental health crisis is happening, friends and colleagues of that person can often be caught off-guard, unprepared and unsure of what to do. The behaviors of a person experiencing a crisis can be unpredictable and can change dramatically without warning. If you're worried that someone you know is in crisis or nearing a crisis, seek help. Make sure to assess the immediacy of the situation to help determine where to start or who to call.

- Is the person in danger of hurting themselves, others or property?
- Do you need emergency assistance?
- Do you have time to start with a phone call for guidance and support from a mental health professional?

Do these things:

- Keep your voice calm
- Avoid overreacting
- Listen to the person
- Express support and concern
- Avoid continuous eye contact
- Ask how you can help
- Keep stimulation level low
- Move slowly
- Offer options instead of trying to take control
- Avoid touching the person unless you ask permission
- Be patient
- Gently announce actions before initiating them
- Give them space, don't make them feel trapped

Do not do these things:

- Don't make judgmental comments
- Don't argue or try to reason with the person

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.