

TIP SHEET #4

HAVING A PEER CONVERSATION

One of the most positive and powerful actions you can take as a leader when someone is struggling with a mental health condition is to have a supportive conversation with them.

The conversations you have about someone’s mental health may be initiated by you or by someone seeking support from you. Either way, having a conversation about mental health can seem daunting. It can be difficult to know what the “right thing to do” is. Unfortunately, this can often mean that the conversation is avoided altogether.

First, it is important to appreciate that leaders have a moral and legal obligation to support employees who may be struggling with their mental health.

In fact, having a direct and conversation with someone about their mental health is one of the most important ways you can do this. This type of conversation:

- 1 Encourages people to seek the support they need.
- 2 Helps organisations provide support.
- 3 Openly reduces stigma associated with mental health conditions.

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES AND CAPABILITIES

When having a conversation with someone about their mental health, it is important to remember your personal boundaries, capabilities, and responsibilities as a leader. A few things to keep in mind are:

- For a range of reasons which may include the quality or nature of your relationship with the person or your capability, you may not be the right person to have the conversation. In this case, your action will be to engage another leader, colleague, human resource or workplace health and safety personnel to have the conversation.
- It is not your role to diagnose a mental health condition or provide counselling. Your role is to listen and understand, demonstrate genuine care and concern, direct a person to support services, apply relevant workplace legislation and your organisation’s policy and procedures, and to maintain a mentally healthy and safe work environment.

HAVING AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORTIVE CONVERSATION

So, how do you have an effective conversation with someone about mental health?

First, remember not to worry about saying the wrong thing or getting the conversation perfect.

You are making a positive difference just by having the conversation.

The PEER Conversation model is a helpful framework to assist leaders to conduct an effective conversation.

THE PEER CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK



P REPAIR

- Maintain a proficient level of mental health condition knowledge and skills (such as through completing a Mental Health Awareness course) to feel comfortable that you are ready to engage in a conversation when required.
- Ensure you are aware of your organisation’s relevant HR policies and mental health support processes available.
- Ensure the conversation is being held in a location that supports the privacy of the person and allows for adequate time. For conversations initiated by others, this may require a suggestion to change location or clearing your schedule.
- Ensure you are aware of and able to manage any unhelpful attitudes you may have towards mental health conditions or the individual.

E NGAGE

- Sometimes, the biggest challenge can be to get a PEER Conversation started.
- It is important to initiate or respond to a conversation in a calm and non-judgemental fashion. When in doubt – focus on listening.
- The opening statement examples below will help you get off to a positive start:

"Thanks for your time Mathew. I've noticed you have not been your usual self lately. I just wanted to check in that you are okay?"

"I am glad we could meet up Sarah. I hope it is okay to check-in with you. It is just that I have noticed a few things about you lately that made me just want to touch base, see how you are going, and if there is anything I can do to help. Is that okay with you?"

"Thanks for reaching out to me Alistair to let me know that things are rough for you right now. I can definitely help. Let's talk more about what's going on for you."

"Thanks for meeting Tom. I have something that might be a bit sensitive to discuss with you. If it is okay, I would like to talk through how you have been going lately? I've noticed that you seem to be struggling?"

"Although I feel a little unsure about this, I would like to discuss how things have been with you lately. Is that okay?"

"I've noticed that you have been quite distracted over the past month. I just wanted to check in to see how you are feeling?"

- To be clear about your obligations and to encourage an open discussion, as the PEER conversation gets started it can be helpful to share the degree of privacy and limits to confidentiality that you can provide. For example, you might say:

"Before we get started/go further, I wanted to let you know that this conversation is intended to be absolutely confidential unless we agree otherwise. However, I do want you to know though that if you are at risk to yourself or someone else in anyway, I may not be able to keep that promise of confidentiality for you. If that happens, I'll let you know straight away and we can talk that through and figure out where to next together."

EXPLORE

- During the Explore phase, the focus is on listening and asking questions.
- Good basic listening skills are about:
 - Not interrupting.
 - Regular eye contact and general focus on the individual.
 - Demonstrating "minimal responding" to indicate understanding which are things like nodding your head, and saying things like "I see"; "I understand"; "Really"; "Okay then".
- Asking effective questions helps you get a thorough understanding of the situation and encourages the other person to self-reflect. It also provides a great opportunity to identify the best ways you may be able to support and collaborate with the employee to establish a plan for moving forward.

Examples of effective Explore questions are:

"Can you help me understand your perspective on this?"

"How do you feel your work is impacted by this?"

"What support would you like from me and the organisation?"

"Can you help me understand how you have been feeling lately?"

"Can you share with me what you think might be contributing to you feeling this way?"

"Is this a new experience for you or something you have been dealing with for a while now?"

"Are you currently getting any support for this?"



RESPOND

- The Respond phase of the conversation is an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding and practical support.
- Once all of the issues have been explored, it is important to respond by identifying the next steps. This is best done through exploring options with the individual and coming to an agreement together.
- Options to most helpfully respond to an individual who presents with a mental health condition may include:
 - Providing a period of leave
 - Referral to additional support such as your organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or TIACS
 - Implementing some practical workplace adjustments

Examples of what you might say here are:

"This seems like a difficult time for you. Given everything we have discussed, what are the best ways that you think I can assist?"

"I have some scope to adjust your role if you think that would help. How do you think we could do that?"

"Would you like any help with seeking professional assistance?"

"This is a challenging time for you. Is it ok to check in with you on a weekly basis to make sure what we have planned is making a difference for you?"

Finally, during this stage, it can be helpful to have your organisation's EAP or TIACS information, links to good websites or other relevant information (such as Fact Sheets from your Mental Health Awareness Online eToolkit) on-hand to provide to the employee.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

For additional information and resources on having an effective conversation with someone about their mental health:

- 1 Review the other Fact Sheets and Tip Sheets in this eToolkit to make sure you have well developed knowledge about mental health conditions.
- 2 Review the “Having an Effective PEER Conversation” video also in the Mental Health Awareness - Leaders eToolkit.

If you or someone you know needs help contact **TIACS** on 0488 846 988 or your organisation’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP), your GP or call: **LifeLine** on 13 11 14, **Kids Helpline** on 1800 551 800, **MensLine Australia** on 1300 789 978 or the **Suicide Call Back Service** on 1300 659 467.