



## Start the Conversation



How to have proactive mental health conversations with your colleagues – and why it matters

With Time to Talk Day (2nd February) taking place this month, there's never been a better opportunity to start much-needed mental health conversations with our colleagues in the workplace.

Established by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, Time to Talk Day encourages individuals and communities to come together and speak openly about their mental health. From struggling with anxiety and depression to dealing with personal loss and bereavement, Time to Talk Day harnesses the power of conversation to help end the stigma around mental suffering – and ultimately, save lives.

Because 1 in 4 people will suffer with a mental health problem, it's important that we all make strides to create a supportive, understanding environment in the workplace. As a major cause of employee absence, mental health challenges need to be met with compassion and kindness to ensure they don't escalate and cause even more of an impact on the individual.

But, how do you go about starting these conversations in a sensitive, appropriate manner?

Many of us may feel uncomfortable asking others to share their feelings, or worry that we're imposing in some way. Similarly, we might feel unequipped to give good advice. Read on to learn some quick tips that will help you connect with your colleagues when they're in need of support.

**Start with a simple "How are you?"** – While asking people how they are might seem like pretty basic advice, it's worth remembering that there's a lot of power in those three little words. Ask your colleagues how they really are, and be sure to listen intently. Let them know that they can open up to you, that your interaction will be confidential, and make sure they know that you're asking because you truly care about their response.

**Try to relate** – Human beings connect best when they can sense a level of rapport with one another. If your colleague expresses their feelings or current situation with you, try to relate it to something that you may also have experienced at some point. This will make them feel more comfortable to talk freely, and could even help them work through their issue by trying some techniques that worked for you.

**Avoid yes/no questions** – Questions that require a yes/no response don't leave a lot of room for further discussion. Instead, try using open-ended questions to encourage your colleagues to think about their responses more deeply. In doing so, they will be more likely to open up and give you vital information about the state of their wellbeing. A few examples of appropriate open-ended questions are: 'How long have you been feeling this way?' 'What do you think is causing you to feel like this?', and 'What can I do to help or support you?'

**Advocate for a safe space** – If your organisation doesn't currently have a quiet, private space for employees to talk about their mental health, why not make a suggestion to your line manager about creating one? This will give you a safe and confidential area to have these conversations away from the rest of the workforce, and will reassure those who are suffering that they can open up without being heard or judged by others.

**Don't diagnose** – Unless you are a trained mental healthcare professional, it's inappropriate to try and diagnose particular mental health conditions in others. Stay away from statements like, "I think you have depression" or, "Sounds like you

have an anxiety disorder to me" – even if you feel like the presenting symptoms point to those conditions. Instead, signpost your colleague to a GP or mental health service and stress the importance of seeking help from a qualified professional.

**Let them know that support is out there** – In some cases, you might find that the person you're talking to needs more help than you can offer. The best option is to make them aware that further support is available. If your colleague is in critical need of advice, you can point them in the direction of urgent [mental health helplines](#), or make them aware of the many [talk therapy and counselling services](#) available through the NHS.

You can also encourage your colleague to visit their Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) to access a 24/7 telephone helpline, face-to-face counselling, and an extensive collection of resources and self-help workbooks for a wide range of mental health concerns.

We hope these tips will empower you to approach mental health conversations in a positive, proactive way. While discussions of this nature are never easy, they can be made more manageable by offering a kind and compassionate ear, a little understanding, and an educated steer in the right direction. In doing so, we can lift the stigma around mental health challenges and make the prospect of opening up a bit less daunting. Let's celebrate Time to Talk Day – every day.

## **Sources**

[Mental Health in the Workplace | Factsheets | CIPD](#)

[Talking About Mental Health | Conversation Topics & Tips \(highspeedtraining.co.uk\)](#)

[Mental health services - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

[Find an NHS talking therapies services - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)