

# Managing Someone You Believe is Suffering from Poor Mental Health

Your usually stable and dependable staff member suddenly starts missing deadlines, makes more mistakes, avoids communication, turns up late for work or multiple meetings, or becomes more irritable and prone to outbursts. As a manager, what do you do?

Your first thought might be to discipline, performance manage or call out the person in the hope that it will rectify the problem. But it's important to remember that these character and performance changes are atypical for the person and could be caused by a mental health issue.



If you suspect someone is suffering from a mental illness, more questions can arise like:

- Is the person suffering from anxiety, depression, or something else? Does my approach change depending on what it might be?
- How do I address what is happening?
- Should I ignore it and hope the person gets better on their own?
- How do I keep things professional, maintain professional-personal boundaries, and not become their counsellor?



**Tip:** Doing nothing will likely exacerbate and prolong the issue. At a certain point, the colleague's pattern of negative behaviour or poor performance can start affecting other staff members, clients and, ultimately, the business. Meanwhile, it's less likely the person in question gets the help and support they need to get back on track.

1. Understand the relationship you have with the person and react accordingly
2. Don't jump to conclusions and directly ask the person if they are suffering from a mental health problem
3. Open the conversation with an observation of their atypical behaviour and express curiosity about what's going on
4. Listen in a non-judgemental way
5. Don't push for more information if the person is not forthcoming
6. Aim to seek a resolution and a plan going forward
7. Avoid becoming the person's de facto therapist or counsellor
8. If they are at risk of self-harm or harm to others, you will need to escalate things and get support through your HR team and possibly even the police.

## UNDERSTAND YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Before talking to someone who you believe is suffering from a potential mental health issue, think about your relationship with the person. This can shape how you approach the conversation.

- If the relationship is poor, holding an open conversation about the issue can prove difficult, mostly because there isn't a pre-existing base of trust to work from. As a result, you should approach the interaction in a more planned and thoughtful way focusing on observable patterns of behaviour while expressing concern about how this is out of character for them.
- If you do hold a close relationship with the person, then you can likely approach the conversation in a more relaxed way, again focusing on why the pattern of behaviour you're witnessing is unusual for them and a concern for you and triggering this welfare check-in.

## FIND OUT MORE

## MANAGING SOMEONE YOU BELIEVE IS SUFFERING FROM POOR MENTAL HEALTH



Tip: Trust can be built by acknowledging the historically solid pattern of performance they are well known for and how highly regarded they are or their conduct or performance has been. It enables you to segue to the change in behaviour more easily to explore what might be going on for them.

### HOW TO APPROACH THE CONVERSATION

If you've decided to broach the subject, your strategy should include two key components.

#### 1 Begin with an observation about the pattern of behaviour

Regardless of how good your relationship is with the person, starting with an observation about a pattern of changed behaviour, or highly atypical occurrence, rather than jumping into the subject of mental health or other inference will help produce a better response.

#### DON'T:

- Ask them directly about anything you've inferred or heard through hearsay or rumour (like their marriage is a problem, or they are suffering from a mental health condition)
- Avoid early questions like: "are you depressed?" Or "are you and your partner going through a bad patch?"

#### DO:

- Make an observation about a situation where the performance or behaviour in question has been observed.
- Begin with something like: "I noted that you have missed a few deadlines lately, which is not like you. I just wanted to check if everything is ok?" or "I've noticed you raised your voice a couple of times at the meeting on Friday and thought that was uncharacteristic of you, is everything okay?"
- Ask if there is anything you can do to help or support them.

#### 2 Let them talk and offer support

Give the person the opportunity to respond. They may well be defensive or dismissive. Ultimately you want to give them the platform to open up to you about any potential issues they might be facing. Once they start talking...

#### DON'T:

- Interject or try to put words in their mouth by guessing where they're going with a particular topic.
- Push the person for more information if they say they don't want to talk about the subject any further.
- Show frustration if you're met with defensiveness or anger from the person.
- Give advice - offer expertise if it's relevant, but avoid telling them what to do and making it about you.
- Try to fix them - an employee who believes you see them as broken may worry that you don't see them as capable or credible, which can undermine their self-confidence.

#### DO:

- Be patient and just listen, it may be a bit messy to begin with.
- Listen carefully to what they are saying or trying to convey.
- Once they're finished, ask the person how they think things should move forward.
- Offer support on behalf of the organisation and explain options that are available.
- Aim to end the conversation with a game-plan of what is to happen next.
- Remind the person that you will check in on them again soon.
- Thank them for the conversation.

### FIND OUT MORE

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