

R U OK? Day

If someone at work asked you 'Are you okay?', how likely would you be to respond truthfully? While we understand the importance of talking about our mental health, it can still be frightening to open up about our feelings to others, especially at work.

R U OK? Day is an annual event held on the second Thursday of September in Australia. It serves as a powerful reminder for people to connect with others and ask a simple yet vital question: 'Are you okay?' The initiative encourages individuals to reach out to family, friends, and colleagues, sparking conversations about mental health and emotional wellbeing.

WHAT IS R U OK? DAY?

The inception of R U OK? Day dates back to 2009, when it was founded by Gavin Larkin, an Australian advertising executive. The inspiration for the movement came from Gavin's personal experience and the profound loss he faced. In 1995, Gavin's father, Barry Larkin, tragically took his own life. The devastating event left Gavin grappling with grief and regret, wishing he had asked his father a simple question that could have made all the difference: 'Are you okay?'

Driven by his desire to prevent others from enduring the same heartache, Gavin embarked on a mission to create a platform that encouraged meaningful conversations about mental health. He believed that by starting conversations and genuinely listening to one another, lives could be saved.

HERE TO HEAR

While R U OK? Day is a designated date to promote mental health conversations, its significance extends far beyond a single day. It serves as a crucial reminder to check up on people's emotional wellbeing throughout the entire year. Mental health issues are not confined to specific dates or events; they affect individuals every day.

The day highlights the importance of fostering a culture of care, empathy, and open communication. It encourages people to be more attentive to their loved ones' struggles, be they visible or hidden. By making R U OK? Day a year-round commitment, the movement strives to create a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing their burdens and seeking help when needed.

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HOW TO ASK AND LISTEN

While bringing up the topic of mental health can be difficult, asking 'Are you ok?' (or equivalent question that is natural to ask in your relationship with the other person), is a powerful way to show care and support for someone going through a tough time.

The theme for 2023's R U OK? Day is **'I'm here to hear'**, which serves as an opportunity for all of us to be active listeners and offer genuine support to those around us. By embracing the theme 'I'm here to hear,' we encourage open conversations about mental health, fostering a safe and understanding environment where individuals feel it's safe to share their struggles.

Here are some steps to help you approach this conversation with authenticity, empathy and sensitivity:

Choose the right time and place:

Find a suitable setting that is natural for you to be in with the other person, so they feel relaxed and at ease to chat.

Express your concern:

Start by expressing genuine concern for the person's wellbeing. Be warm and empathetic in your approach, letting them know that you're there to listen and support without judgment. Use natural language and be yourself, as authenticity is key.

Ask open-ended questions:

Encourage the person to talk openly about how they're feeling. Ask open-ended questions like, "How have you been doing lately?" or "Is there something on your mind that you'd like to talk about?". Don't be formal or ask questions in a way that would seem odd to the other person as this can be a barrier to them opening up.

Actively listen:

Listening is key to a successful 'R U OK?' conversation. Give the person your full attention and validate their feelings. Avoid interrupting or rushing to provide solutions.

Validate their feelings:

After they share their thoughts and emotions, reflect back on what they've said to show that you understand. Offer validation by acknowledging their feelings, such as saying, "It sounds like you've been feeling really overwhelmed lately" or "...Gosh, that's really tough mate, I get it now" – remember, your usual language, not 'counselling speak'.

Encourage them to seek support:

Let the person know that it's okay to ask for help and that they don't have to face their challenges alone. Suggest available resources, such as professional counselling or their company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or a mutually trusted friend or professional who is great in times of need.

Check-in and follow up:

Demonstrate ongoing support by checking in with the person regularly. Let them know, through your actions, that you care about their wellbeing and that you're there to lend a listening ear whenever they need it.

Remember, it's essential to approach these conversations with sensitivity and compassion. Not everyone may be ready to open up immediately, and that's okay. Your support and willingness to listen can be enough to make a difference.

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TIPS FOR ORGANISATIONS THIS R U OK? DAY

In the workplace, fostering a mentally healthy environment contributes to improved productivity, job satisfaction, and overall wellbeing.

Here are some practical steps for managers and organisations to check up on people's mental health at work:

Talk about it:

Organise mental health workshops, seminars, and training sessions to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Encourage employees to participate and be open to discussing their experiences.

Create safe spaces:

Establish safe spaces where employees can talk about their challenges without fear of judgment. Appoint mental health ambassadors, peer supporters, or establish a support network to help individuals in need.

Make regular check-ins the norm:

Encourage managers and colleagues to conduct regular check-ins with their team members. A simple, sincere question like "How are you going?" or "How are things?" can open doors to meaningful conversations.

Promote your EAP program:

Some employees may not know about their EAP, or they may be afraid to approach it. It's a good idea to ensure that these services are well-publicised and readily available. If they don't have one, check if their partner or an immediate family member may have one as they will be able to access that in most cases.

R U OK? Day originated from one person's determination to prevent others from experiencing the pain of losing a loved one to suicide. Since its inception, the movement has grown into a global initiative that encourages people to have honest conversations about mental health and wellbeing.

As a year-round reminder, R U OK? Day urges individuals to check up on one another, fostering a culture of care and empathy. By taking practical steps to support mental health both at work and at home, we can create a culture where asking 'Are you okay?' is a powerful act of kindness that saves lives.