

A GUIDE TO CONVERSATION

How do I address the subject when I sense that a co-worker is feeling unwell?



When people around us aren't doing well psychologically, we often notice it by changes in their behaviour. For example, the person involved withdraws, becomes irritable more quickly or seems distant. Whereas among family members or friends we often ask openly what's wrong, in a work context that doesn't seem quite so easy. We're afraid to overstep the mark or say the wrong thing. But it doesn't have to be that way at all! If we ask considerately and sensitively at work, it helps co-workers who are going through a rough time – and makes it possible for them to get help if worst comes to worst. Take your time for a conversation like this, for instance during your lunch break or while taking a walk. Here's how you can structure the conversation.



Share your observations



Start by sharing your observations. Describe very neutrally what you've noticed – the person's behaviour. Avoid snap decisions, value judgements, and interpretations.

"Listen, I've missed you at the most recent team events. I just wanted to ask how you're doing these days."

"Recently you've seemed to me to be a little quiet. Is that just my impression? How are you doing these days?"

"In the situation we were just in, I had the sense that you didn't feel comfortable. Would you like to talk about it?"



Sympathise



If the person doesn't want to talk about it, that's just fine – don't push for a discussion. If the person does open up, it's important to value that trust and sympathise.

"That sounds like a really tough time."

"I'm so sorry you feel like that ..."

"I understand. That sounds awful."



Shed light on possible causes



The next step is about locating underlying causes for the person's behaviour. Psychological stress isn't necessarily behind it – it might be trouble at work or in the family.

"Have you any idea what might be connected with this?"

"Have you had this feeling more frequently of late?"

"What do you think is causing this?"

"Is there something specific that's bothering you right now?"



Listen and ask open-ended questions



Make an effort to really listen and ask open-ended questions. At no point in this conversation are you expected to find solutions. Instead it's about you being there and giving the other person space to express his or her thoughts.

Also, try to maintain eye contact during the conversation and don't get distracted by messages or the like.

"How have you experienced this?"

"How are you dealing with it currently?"

Even if you've initiated the conversation, it's important for you not to feel responsible for the person. It's not your task to help directly, but you can support the person in finding help. Ask what support he or she already has. Maybe you know someone you can recommend, or you can help look for support. Now is the time to speak about it.

"Have you already spoken with anyone about this – a therapist, for instance?"

"What support do you have at home right now?"

"Do you need help looking for support?"

"I'd be glad to give you a phone number."

"Is there anything I or the team can support you in?"

"Do you want to talk about it with others on the team or with our lead? Do you need support with that?"

Here you can fill in a few help resources in your organization that you can refer to during the conversation:



A few tips about the way you converse



- You're not responsible for solving the problems; you're there to help the other person get help
- Open-minded listening and open-ended questions instead of interpretation and judgements
- Asking again is better than asking too seldom
- If the other person doesn't want to talk, that doesn't mean your offer to talk was wrong

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