



**Mental Health  
Ireland**

# TIPS FOR MANAGERS:

supporting an employee  
who is experiencing a mental  
health challenge.

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It is important to recognise that an employee's performance or behaviour can be affected if they are experiencing a mental health challenge. If you have specific grounds for concern, such as high absence levels or impaired performance, it's important to address these at an early stage. The support people receive from their manager is key in determining how well and how quickly they are able to get back to peak performance and wellbeing. If you notice a member of your team is experiencing mental health difficulties, or they disclose it to you, it is essential you have a conversation with

them about their needs. This will help you to evaluate and introduce appropriate support or adjustments.

To support positive mental health at work effectively, you'll need to call into play your people management skills, as well as empathy and common sense. Model an openness about mental health and mental health challenges. Managers can model openness about mental health by generating open discussions in the workplace on the topic in general or by having materials about mental health distributed regularly within the organisation. Consider whether the workplace culture encourages disclosure or not and work towards an open supportive work environment. This can be made evident through you being approachable and listening to staff when they are seeking help.

# THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND



- > Your role is to support and signpost
- > You are not there to diagnose or fix
- > Give Time & Space
- > Avoid making assumptions

- > **Being Non-judgemental & Compassionate**
- > **Be prepared with helpful information on signposting and supports available**

**Most people with mental health challenges live productive and positive lives while managing the challenges.** Avoid making assumptions. It can be difficult for people to disclose information relating to their mental health, so make it easier by keeping an open mind and giving them space to talk it out. Avoid trying to guess what symptoms an employee might have and how these might affect their ability to do their job. Remember, many people are able to manage their challenges and perform their role to a high standard. Mental health is fluid. Mental distress affects people in different ways and at different times in their lives, so be prepared to adapt your support to suit the individual at the particular time.



**As managers you are NOT there to diagnose or to deliver/ provide treatment. Managers are there to provide support/help/signposting to the employee.** This is to enable the individual to address their own issues in order that they can continue to be a part of the team and to work productively. It is important to be aware of this boundary while at the same time recognise that there is a duty of care to the employee, the team and the organisation. Always remember you are doing with and not for the person you are trying to support.

**Choose a private and comfortable place to have the conversation.** It is important to make people feel comfortable. Choose a time where you know you won't be disturbed or distracted by work and place at work that gives privacy. If the individual is a remote worker, consider whether going to them might help. Always follow your organisations policies about offsite meetings.

**Having some information about the types of supports available and where/how to access them can be helpful for you and your employee.** Sometimes people want to find out more in their own time – why not have some brochures or materials to hand? The person you are talking to might have lots of questions and want more information.

- > **An appointment with a GP is a good starting point to get support locally. They can signpost to talking therapies or other forms of support including Counselling in Primary Care and Secondary Care supports.**

A database of accredited counsellors can be found at [www.iacp.ie](http://www.iacp.ie).

If your organisation has an employee assistance programme, research the process for referring.

[www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie) or HSE Live can provide excellent signposting support. For HSE Live call-save 1850 241 850 or 041 685 0300, Lines open 8am – 8pm, Monday – Friday & 10am – 5pm Saturday, email [hselive@hse.ie](mailto:hselive@hse.ie)

Samaritans are available on the phone 24/7. Free call 116 123, Text 087 260 9090, Email, [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie). Email response may take a little longer. They are a great listening and signposting support.

Aware, Shine, Suicide or Survive, Recovery Colleges and others run self-care and recovery orientated courses are also available.

In an emergency call 999 or 112.

# WHAT DO I SAY?



Whilst what you say is of course important, giving someone the time and safe space to say how they feel and to really be listened to is essential. Keep these things in mind when chatting with someone about their mental health.

- > **Compassion and non-judgment**
- > **Be honest, direct and clear in what you are saying**
- > **Respect confidentiality but explain the limitations of that confidentiality. i.e You may have to disclose if you have concerns for their safety or the safety of others**
- > **Questions to ask / Questions to avoid**
- > **Push back**

**There are no perfect things to say.** Try to be friendly and open in what you are saying instead of feeling you have to say the right thing. This is just your work colleague in front of you. They may be going through some challenges but they are still the same person.

**Be honest, direct and clear in what you are saying.** Try some of these openers:

- > How are you doing?
- > You don't seem yourself lately, how's it going?
- > I noticed you've been quiet this week, you OK?
- > What's been happening for you lately?
- > I haven't caught up with you and wanted to see how you are feeling?
- > How's life? How are the family?
- > You got time for a coffee and catch up?

- > Work's been full on this month, how're you managing?

**Use open questions or at least follow a closed question with an open question.** For example: 'I noticed you've been quiet this week, you OK?' Then you could follow with something like, 'What's been happening for you lately?'

If your colleague says they are fine but you still feel they are not, **ask again**. Perhaps try asking a different question.

**Avoid accusatory or assumption-based questions** like:

- > What's wrong with you?
- > Why are you acting so strangely?
- > Why are you always looking so depressed?
- > What's with the low energy?
- > You're not the same person we took on. What's wrong?
- > Is it that time of the month?



**You may experience push back. That is ok. If they don't want to talk, don't criticise them.** Tell them you're still concerned and are there if they would like to talk at a different time. Avoid a confrontation. You could say: "Please call me if you ever want to chat about this again." or "Is there someone else you'd rather talk to?"

If now is a good time for them to talk and they do engage with you **LISTEN**.

- > **Take what they say seriously and don't interrupt or rush the conversation.**
- > **Don't judge their experiences or reactions but acknowledge that things seem tough for them.**

- > If they need time to think, sit patiently with the silence.
- > Encourage them to explain: “How are you feeling about that?” or “How long have you felt that way?”
- > Show that you’ve listened by repeating back what you’ve heard (in your own words) and ask if you have understood them properly.
- > Know you don’t have to have any or all the answers.
- > And remember: COMPASSION, COMPASSION, COMPASSION.



**Respect confidentiality but explain the limitations of that confidentiality.** i.e You may have to disclose if you have concerns for their safety or the safety of others. Reassure the individual that any private information they disclose will not be leaked to their colleagues. Discuss with the individual any information they would like shared with team colleagues and how, as this can be very supportive for some people.

# WHAT DO WE DO NOW?



It is natural at this point of the conversation to sometimes feel a little overwhelmed. It is important to remember that your colleague may feel very vulnerable having opened up and potentially become upset. Give them a minute to relax and take a few breaths yourself. Remember again that you are doing with rather than doing for.

The following might help you:

- > **Thank, Acknowledge, Reassure**
- > **Focus on Strengths, Encourage Action**
- > **Agree a Plan**
- > **Set a date for Check In**
- > **Closing the Conversation**
- > **If Unsure Seek Support**
- > **Self-Care**
- > **Returning to Work**
- > **Crisis Support**
- > **Irish Legislation**

**Thank your colleague** for trusting you and sharing what is happening for them. Let them know you appreciate and respect that trust.

**Acknowledge that things seem hard for them** and acknowledge the energy it must take for them to have been continuing business as usual.

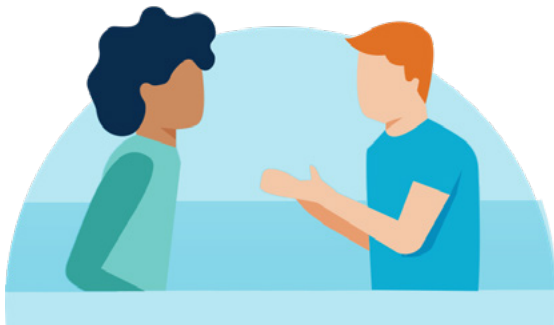
Let them know many people experience mental health challenges.

**Reassure them that they were right to chat with you** and you can work together on the next steps.

**Avoid advising or telling them what worked for you/** someone you know unless asked. **Remember that each person's recovery journey is different** and what worked for you or someone you know may not work for them.

**Avoid statements like:**

- > **You should do mindfulness.**
- > **Man up.**
- > **It'll pass.**
- > **Cheer Up.**
- > **It's not as bad as you think.**
- > **Sure, it's that time of year. Get a SAD lamp/ vitamin D tablets/blueberries/porridge/a weighted blanket.**
- > **You should give up the pizzas and eat healthier.**
- > **I go to the gym and I always feel great. Why don't you do that.**
- > **Why don't you go to the GP and ask for antidepressants? They worked for my sister/ aunt/neighbour's stepmother.**



**It's important to assist the person in identifying their own supports and strengths.** Trust that the person has the answers and strengths required to move themselves on through the next steps. You can help them reflect and identify these supports and to assist in linking them in with them if required. Remember you are doing with not for.

Consider asking some of the following questions:

- > Have you ever felt like this before?
- > What have you done in the past to manage similar situations?
- > Is there someone in your life who you trust and who could support you?
- > How would you like me to support you?

- > What do you need right now in this moment?
- > What's something you can do for yourself right now? Something that's enjoyable or relaxing?
- > So what is your next step today?

**If they've been feeling unwell for more than 2 weeks, encourage them to see a health professional.** Again remember you are doing with not for. You could say:

- > It might be useful to link in with someone who can support you. I'm happy to assist you to find the right person to talk to.
- > The GP is often a great first point of contact for looking after your mental health. They usually have links with the other support services and know what's available in the community. Have you a GP?
- > There's a good website/live line for getting information about the types of supports that are out there. Would you like us to give them a ring?
- > I have an information sheet and some leaflets from local supports. We can have a look at some of them if you like?
- > Did you know we have an Employee Assistance Programme. Lots of people use it when they are going through a tough time. Would you like to have a look at some of the options in it? It's confidential and solely there to support employees.

**Be positive about the role of professionals** in getting through tough times.



**Agree a plan with the person.** Let the person lead in identifying what they need to support themselves. Be as flexible as possible in your responses and in how you can facilitate them getting the care they need. **Encourage the person to name their next step.**

Endings are important as people may experience increased vulnerability having disclosed how they are feeling. The ending is an opportunity to close things down and to provide reassurance.

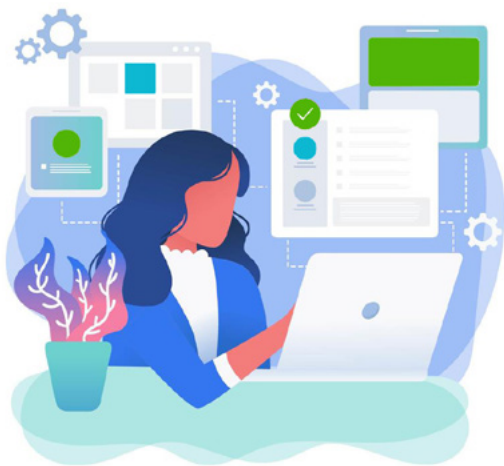
- > **Sometimes conversations will come to a natural end. However, if this does not happen give the person a gentle indication that the conversation needs to come to an end.**
- > **Thank, acknowledge and reassure again.**
- > **Summarise your conversation and anything you have both agreed to do. For example: "You have told me that you are going to speak to your GP about how you are feeling, and I will text you by the end of the day with the details of how to access counselling sessions through our Employee Assistance Programme."**
- > **Ask practical questions such as 'Is there going to be someone there when you get home?' or 'Is there a friend you can go and see?'**
- > **Let the person know about Samaritans service and to contact their local A& E if they need support immediately.**

- > **It may not be possible to get a clear idea of the next steps the person will take as a result of talking to you. Ending the conversation by inviting them to take some time to reflect on what has been discussed and to consider what they may want to do going forward could be the best way to bring the conversation to a close, especially if you feel that there is nothing more you can say at that time.**
- > **Agree a next date for a check in.**

**Look after yourself. Self-Care is essential.** Providing support to someone else can be draining. Mind yourself and be aware of the impact on your own mental wellbeing. Make time for a break after you have spoken with the person. Do something nice for yourself. Know your limits. Be realistic about what support you can offer and try not to take too much on. Even if your colleague has asked you not to tell anyone, it is important that you can talk to someone whilst respecting your colleague's privacy. You can talk to someone you trust or a manager without using identifying details.



# Returning to work and Adjustments at Work.



Many people who have been on sick leave due to mental health challenges can dread returning to work. There are ways of keeping in touch that will help overcome that awkwardness later on.

Ask the person who is on sick leave what they would like their colleagues to be told. Try to get a balance between maintaining their confidentiality and letting people understand what's happening.

Invite them out when staff are spending leisure time together. They may decline, but still appreciate being asked.

Send cards and call your colleague if you would normally socialise with them – just as you would if they had a physical health problem.

Have a 'cup of tea' policy where someone can come into the office informally before returning to work.

Agree with the person how best to contact them. Ask them if it is ok for you to call to see how they are doing.



Don't make assumptions about what someone can and can't do.

When returning to work, in some jobs, the person could begin by doing a task at home.

Sometimes a phased return to work can be helpful, with someone working a few hours a day and building back up to working their contracted hours.

If you're unsure what is reasonable, ask for advice from your HR manager or occupational health advisor.

Ask what would help them at work. They may need a quiet place to work or more time to perform certain tasks.

If they haven't been performing as well as usual, they may feel guilty or fearful about it. Be honest in assessing their performance – they may feel their performance is worse than it is.

It can be useful to agree in advance how to handle any continuing challenges. Encourage your colleague to identify factors that might play a role in them becoming unwell and consider how to deal with them. You may also want to agree how best to respond to a crisis.

Be aware that new computer systems or other changes, restructuring or the risk of redundancy can be especially difficult for someone who is also coping with a mental health challenge.

In the language you use and the attention you give them, treat them with respect and act as a role model to encourage other colleagues to do the same.

Suggest they ask for advice from your occupational health advisor or contact any support service your organisation uses such as the Employee Assistance Programme.

After your first conversation, arrange another meeting to check how your colleague is coping and whether further changes to their working arrangements are needed. Then keep the conversation going.

Although the following may never happen in your workplace having the information can help if a crisis situation does arise.



**In the event that you have concerns for your colleague's safety:**

If you believe your colleague is in immediate danger, someone else is in immediate danger or they have injuries that need medical attention, **you need to take action to make sure they are safe.** You may be concerned that the person is self-harming, feeling suicidal and likely to act on these feelings, or experiencing their own or a different reality. **If there is an immediate risk that the person will harm themselves, they will need emergency help.** Where possible make every effort to help the person to seek help for themselves, with your support if required.

Ask direct questions using clear language. For example, "You seem very low and I'm worried about you. Are you thinking of ending your life?" Asking such a direct question

won't give the person the idea to take their own life. Any thoughts of suicide the person might have will have developed over time. By asking the question, you will give the person an opportunity to open up and to talk.

- > **If the answer is yes, don't panic.**
- > **Listen to them.**
- > **Repeat what they have said back to clarify. E.g. 'From what you have said I understand you have a plan to end your life.'**
- > **Take them seriously.**
- > **You may feel a sense of crisis too, but it's important to stay calm.**
- > **Ask if there is someone they would like you to contact.**

If they have hurt themselves, make sure they get the first aid they need.

Don't send them home if they say they would prefer some quiet time to themselves.

If someone tells you they are feeling suicidal or can't go on, or if you suspect they are thinking of taking their own life, it is very important to encourage them to get help. You or they should contact a GP or the emergency services. They can also contact the [Samaritans](#) straight away by calling 116 123 for free at any time. They could also get help from their friends, family, or mental health services if they are

already linked in with them. You or they can phone the free Pieta House 24-hour suicide helpline on 1800 247 247.

Wait with the person until crisis supports or their friend or family member have arrived.

If the person refuses to get help and they decide to leave and you have a genuine concern for their safety call the emergency services.

In this situation it is important to get additional support for yourself from the HR department or a manager.

**If there is no immediate risk of danger, the person will still need other professional supports. You can help them link in with them.**

**What is very helpful is to have a couple of employees trained in this area and you can get more information on SafeTalk on [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)**

# Irish Legislation



Employers and staff should be aware of the law relevant to mental health at work.

Ireland's equality legislation exists to protect people from certain kinds of discrimination. People with mental health difficulties are covered under this law, as part of the disability category. The law applies to people if they are currently experiencing mental health difficulties, or if they have experienced mental health difficulties in the past.

The aim of equality legislation is to help people:

- > **Access employment**
- > **Participate and advance in employment**
- > **Undertake training**

There are two main equality laws:

- > **The Employment Equality Acts, 1998- 2011 protect people from employment discrimination. This includes discrimination in finding a job, keeping a job or doing work experience or vocational training. They also include advertising, equal pay, promotion and dismissal.**
- > **The Equal Status Acts, 2001-2011 protect people against discrimination when buying or accessing goods and services. This could include discrimination when accessing healthcare, education, social opportunities or while looking for accommodation.**

Remember that once aware of health or disability information, the employer also has a legal duty to consider making reasonable adjustments as well as a general duty of care and responsibility for employee health and preventing personal injury. MentalHelp.ie have some useful information about employment law and mental health in Ireland. <http://mentalhelp.ie/equality-law/>









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