headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

responding to disclosures of mental health issues

Mental health issues are common and it is likely that at some point, people in your workplace may need support around their mental health and wellbeing.

This fact sheet will help you to know what you can say and do to support a young worker who lets you know that they're not OK, and to understand mental health issues and work rights.

Remaining at work or returning to work after a period of mental health difficulty has benefit for the young worker and business. It can improve quality of life, provide routine and structure, provide purpose for the young worker and help them to feel connected. Benefits for the workplace include retaining valuable skills and experience and creating a culture where people feel valued, supported and want to work.

Having a supportive conversation with your staff

Talking about mental health issues is often hard and many young workers will try to cope on their own for as long as they can. Reaching out to someone can take a lot of courage and is often a sign that they have reached a point where they would like to get some help.

Mental Health and Work Rights

As an employer, you are legally required to ensure (as far as is practical) that your staff are safe, both physically and mentally. For more information, visit **Safe Work Australia** (safeworkaustralia.gov.au).

Having a mental health condition does not often significantly affect a person's ability to perform their job and a worker is not required to disclose a mental health issue. However, it is important to offer a supportive conversation. For more guidance on privacy and disclosure, visit the **Australian Human Rights Commission website** (humanrights.gov.au/our-work/appendix-knowing-law).

Starting the conversation

Some employers worry that they do not have the expertise to help. But you do not need to be an expert to be of support to a young worker. Some examples of ways to start a conversation might be:

- Ask, "How have things been going for you lately?"
- Comment on the changes that you've noticed and let them know you're concerned for them.
- 'I'm a bit worried about you, I've noticed …. how are things?'
- 'I've noticed that …… I'm happy to talk or listen and see if I can help.'

Be relaxed in your approach. You don't want them to feel like they're under investigation.

It's important to be clear on your intention too – this should be a supportive chat about mental health and not performance management. Being clear on the supportive focus of the conversation may help the young worker feel comfortable opening up.

When a young person is having problems with their mental health their work can be impacted. But for many young people continuing to attend work, with some support, flexibility and modifications can be good for their mental health and recovery.

Respond appropriately to a mental health disclosure in the workplace

If the person decides to talk to you, acknowledge it can be a hard step to take but reassure them that they have done the right thing. Let them know you care, show empathy, and thank them for talking with you.

Sometimes a young worker may open up unexpectedly and if you're not prepared, you might feel unsure of what to do. If this happens, consider moving the conversation to a private space and taking time to listen to what's going on for them.

It's ok to take it slow and taking a few deep breaths can help with managing feelings of being overwhelmed. Remember, you don't need to fix what's going on for the young worker – simply listening and offering support can go a long way.

Avoid saying things like 'look on the bright side' as it can contribute to a feeling of not being understood. Instead consider reflecting what they've told you and offering support by saying something like 'that sounds really stressful/difficult. How can I help?' or 'I'm sorry to hear that this is happening for you'.

If you get stuck or start to feel overwhelmed, take a deep breath, validate the young person's decision to reach out, let them know you want to help and assist them to connect with another support person. This might be a Human Resources manager, a trusted colleague, or a support service such as Lifeline or your Employee Assistance Program (if you have one).

Making a plan

If a young worker discloses mental health issues, it's important to collaborate with them to develop a plan to best support them at work. This plan may include addressing workplace concerns, making reasonable adjustments, involving others, and connecting the young worker with support.

If the young worker's mental health has been impacted by problems at work (such as work load pressures or bullying), take action to address these concerns and talk to the young worker about what they think needs to change to support their safety at work.

Reasonable adjustments are changes to a job role that help someone with a mental health condition to keep working or return to work if they have needed time off. The young worker may have ideas about what they need to best support them at work.

Accommodations that you might consider offering:

- Flexible work arrangements. For example, altering work times, places or providing breaks.
- Adjusting their role and seeking to minimise work stress.
- Helping line managers to understand how to respond and what the worker might need.

- Providing a supportive contact person or mentor to continue to check in with the worker and review the plan.
- Adjusting work schedules if the worker would like to take leave.
- Promoting and displaying support services in a prominent place.

Adjustments could be temporary or permanent and should be reviewed regularly.

Sometimes it's helpful to strengthen the young person's support network by involving others. Before sharing information with someone else, ask the young worker what they feel comfortable with others knowing. For example, a manager may need to know that the young person needs flexible work arrangements however they may not need to know the details of the employee's personal circumstances.

It's important to talk the young worker about who needs to know too. For example, the worker's line manager or HR might need to be aware, but all of their colleagues might not.

A worker may ask you to keep their disclosure to yourself. In these circumstances you should ensure that the information disclosed is confidential unless there is risk for the employee or others. Be clear about who you will tell and not tell.

What to do next

Seeking help outside of the workplace

After a mental health disclosure, there are several options to support the young worker for next steps outside of work.

- It can be helpful for a young person to let others in their life know of their difficulties. Can they tell a parent, house mate, friend or sibling?
- A GP is often a good place to begin. They will know local service providers and can help to sort out the right place to go.
- If the person is 25 or under they can **contact their local headspace centre** (headspace.org.au/headspace-centres).
- eheadpsace provides free online and telephone support for young people (12-25 years) and their families and friends.

If it is an emergency the young worker can go to the local emergency department or call 000. They could call Lifeline 13 11 14 or Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800.

Once the plan is in place, it's important to regularly review how it's working for the young employee. Are the adjustments helpful? How are they going with obtaining support? Is there anything else they need to best support them at work?

Talking to someone about their mental health difficulties can be very hard for a young person. They may fear judgment, discrimination or that they might lose their job. Being met with understanding, care and concern can make it much easier for them to take the next step toward seeking help and getting back on track.

For more information on what you can do to support young employees at work, check out headspace.org.au/employers

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