

CivicAction's MindsMatter: How to be supportive of co-workers who may be experiencing a mental health issue: tips and links to videos

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Mentally healthy workplaces benefit everyone. People's good mental health correlates with job satisfaction, higher morale, engagement, retention, and productivity. Mishandling or failing to respond to employees or co-workers who are experiencing mental health issues or mental illnesses can have negative effects on their mental health, disrupt normal working relationships, and be costly and time-consuming. Read on for information about how to better know if your co-worker needs help, and what you can do to contribute to your workplace's mental health.

If You or a Co-worker is in Crisis

1. Call 911 or Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000
2. Connex Ontario provides information about mental health services and supports in communities across Ontario. Call **1-866-531-2600** 24 hours and day, seven days a week or visit <http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/>

Early Warning Signs

Mentally healthy people are resilient and flexible. They have the capacity to manage stress and overcome daily challenges. When a co-worker can no longer manage workplace pressure, adapt quickly to change, take decisive action, or begins to perform poorly, there may be an underlying mental health problem or illness. A co-worker experiencing a mental health challenge or illness may appear angry or tired, miss work more often than usual, have more conflicts with co-workers, become quiet and withdrawn, or avoid previously enjoyable social situations.

Your Role as a Co-worker

If you think someone may be experiencing a mental health issue, you can help by providing encouragement and information on supportive services available in the workplace (such as an employee and family assistance plan) or in the community.

It is important that you do not try to diagnose the problem. This should be left to a trained health professional. It is enough that you have noticed a change in a co-worker's behaviour and have expressed your concern and support. If you have a supportive supervisor, you may want to identify that there is a problem and you are concerned about your co-worker's health. Also,

1. Consider that your attitudes and behaviour can impact the mental health of others
2. Challenge or report disrespectful behaviour and attitudes when you see them
3. Be mindful of the language you use, and use language that puts people first.
 - a. Someone is a person with a mental illness, not mentally ill.
 - b. Avoid phrases that trivialize psychiatric diagnoses, like *I'm feeling a bit OCD today*, or *I must be having an Alzheimer's moment*.
 - c. Avoid derogatory terms like *crazy* or *insane*
4. Know your workplace's policy on harassment and bullying
5. Encourage your employer to take CivicAction's free, confidential online assessment that will give them suggested actions and resources at www.civicaction.ca/mindsmatter

Scenario #1: A co-worker is not themselves

You've noticed that a co-worker is not their usual self. They seem overly tired and irritable and are withdrawing from workplace interactions such as coffee breaks and water cooler chats.

Find a time when you can have a private chat. Ask them how they are. You've noticed they aren't themselves. They seem to be struggling and you are worried. Encourage them to seek help from their doctor, a community agency or through the workplace if your organization offers an employee assistance plan. Continue to check in with them to see how they are doing and let them know you are there to support them.

Scenario #2: An employee is showing signs of stress and is missing deadlines

You've noticed that an employee has been struggling with their workload and deadlines. They are generally a good worker but their performance seems to be declining.

Find a time to have a private talk. Let them know you have observed changes in their behaviour and wonder if everything is OK. Encourage them to seek help and provide details of services available through your organization's employee assistance plan if one is available. Let them know their job is safe and that you will work with them to make a work plan to help them over the rough spot if needed. Tell them you will check back in a week to see how they are progressing and to work out a plan.

Scenario #3: A co-worker is returning to work after short-term disability leave

A co-worker is returning from short-term disability leave. You're pretty sure it was for a mental-health related problem. Before they left, they had been showing signs of stress and depression.

Greet them warmly and tell them you are glad to see them back. Find a time when you can have a chat to catch up with them, such as over coffee or lunch. Let them know that you are there to support them and you understand that it may take time for them to get back to full speed.

Continue to include them in workplace activities. Don't tolerate critical remarks from other co-workers.

To see videos about these scenarios and other advice, visit these websites:

Beyondblue

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

<http://learn.beyondblue-elearning.org.au/BeyondBlue/conversations/index.html>

Mental Health Commission of Canada in partnership with Ottawa Public Health

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2NuAPXp8ohZmoVaECi6sRiV9IQ25Xkld>

Mindful Employer Canada

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/81vpgknuuzcgycw/Conversation%20Framework.mp4?dl=0>

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/z95prw0rqmah4qk/Work%20competence%20and%20mental%20illness.mp4?dl=0>

Canadian Mental Health Association <http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/what-i-wish-i-knew/>