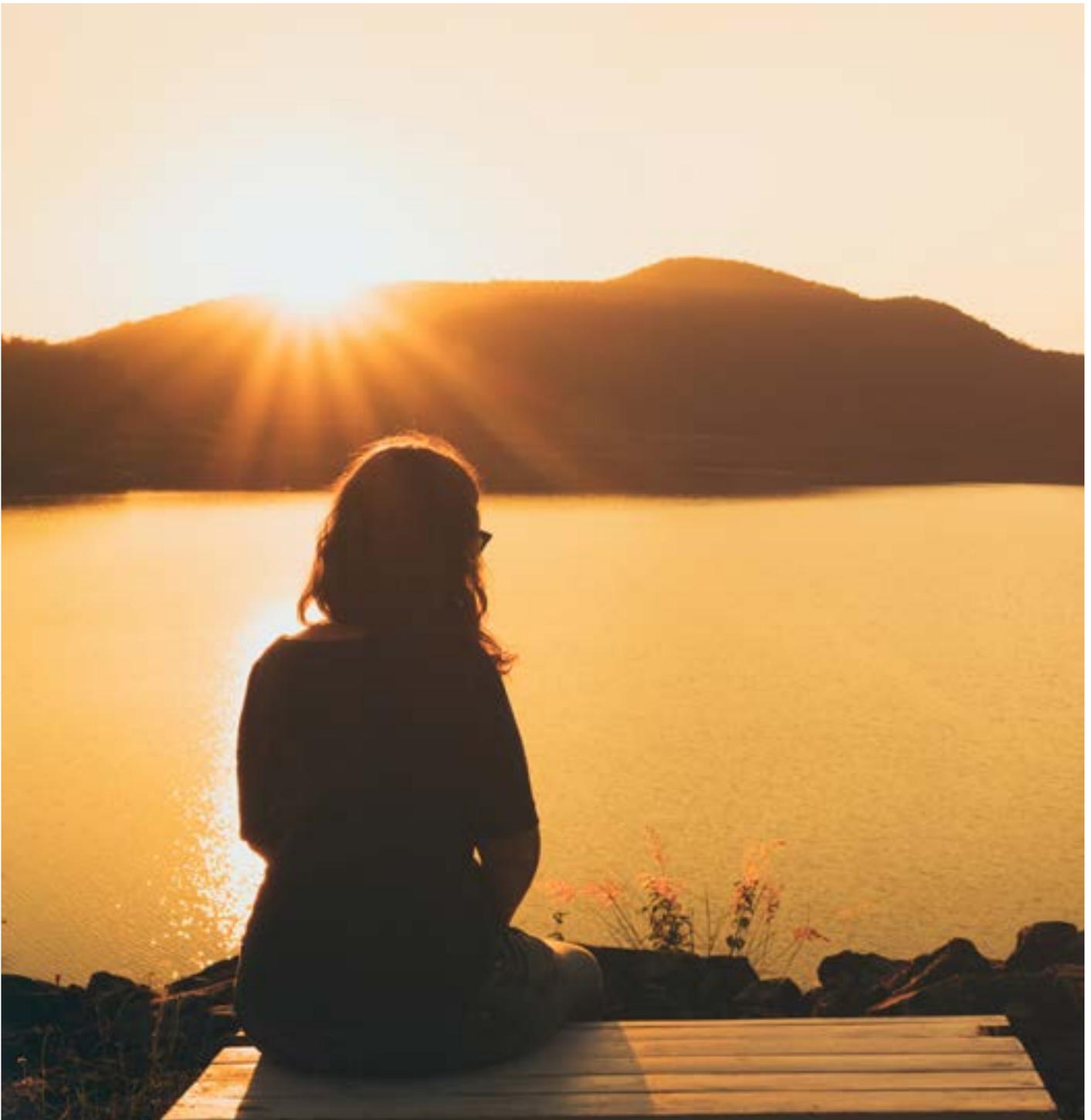




We are here to help you.

Covid-19:

Are you ready for a mental health conversation?



Talking openly about how we're feeling and coping (or not as the case may be) can be tough and make us feel exposed - particularly in a working environment, where we might think or assume that doing so could negatively impact our performance discussions or how we're viewed and received by others. And perhaps even more so currently, due to the social disconnection and isolation many are experiencing. Your team members might be demonstrating varying degrees of comfort in expressing how they're feeling and asking for help. It's true, some will be more ready and willing to talk than others, but remember, just because someone says they're 'ok', doesn't mean they don't want and/or need your support. What you see (albeit virtually at the moment) and what's visible or evident, can often only be the tip of the iceberg or a 'persona', in that we project into the world what we want others to see and perceive. Therefore it's helpful to think about the personality types you might have within your teams. This could include:

Open Book

Tend to be comfortable talking about their feelings, emotions or personal circumstances and will respond openly and honestly to questions seeking to understand how they're doing.

Will tend to wear their heart on their sleeve so often won't even need to be asked how they are doing explicitly, as they'll divulge this information freely themselves. As such, it tends to be easier to gauge where this person is at on any given day and therefore how to react, respond and support.

Closed Book

Don't feel comfortable talking about their feelings, emotions or personal circumstances and will likely not respond to or engage with questions seeking to understand how they're doing.

This person may also be harder to read, in that they don't give a lot away through their expressions, actions and behaviours. How can you encourage them to open up without being too intrusive?

It may be they're feeling sad, anxious, overwhelmed or isolated, but don't know how to express this to you. How can you get under the skin of how they're feeling and seek to understand them more?

Somewhere in between...

This person may fall somewhere in between an open and closed book – perhaps being more open and forthcoming in some situations, but less so in others. Or it may be they're more comfortable talking to certain people (those they know well, for example).

You may find it relatively easy to start an open and transparent conversation here – depending on the circumstances.

How can you ensure this person knows you're available for them to reach out to and connect with if they need to, without them feeling any pressure? How can you stay in tune with how they're feeling – taking cues from what they're saying, their body language and behaviours.

Resilient Hero

That person who is always first to support others and never asks for support themselves. The one who always has a big smile on their face and says everything is ok. This person (who may be an open or closed book themselves) may need to be reminded and reassured that it's ok not to feel ok, and that we all have good and bad days – which they're fully entitled to feel and experience too. Putting on a 'front' or wearing a mask can be exhausting, so how can you help this person to understand they don't have to smile and pretend they're ok, if in fact, that's not the case. They may also be struggling to accept that they're finding things tough (in denial) or they may think their suffering doesn't 'merit' support in relation to others – how can you help them let their guard down and accept support? It's important to keep a particular eye on people who fall within this group, as they can so often be totally overlooked and when they're struggling this may fall under the radar.





As a leader, it's important that you understand how your people are, and how they're coping. This will give you the best chance of success in supporting them. Mental health can be difficult to talk about, but checking in on how someone is as part of a daily interaction or 121 is possible and perhaps a more natural way to understand how a person is doing. During these times, you may find that team members share more with you than they might normally. Remember, you're not expected to be a mental health professional, and your team member may raise some questions you don't know the answer to – but that's ok. Provided you go into the conversation with the right intent and demonstrate positive and supportive behaviours, you'll be able to create a safe space in which you can explore the current situation and how they're feeling in response to this together.

Consider following these tips:

Show genuine kindness, care and compassion. Bearing in mind the person may be feeling fragile or vulnerable, and this could be a very difficult and uncomfortable conversation for them to be having – so think about your tone of voice and your body language as you listen.

Provide a good listening ear. Sometimes just listening and giving a person space to be heard is all that's needed. If you're worried you won't be sure what to say, that's ok, as often you won't need to say anything at all.

Be willing and ready to listen. Ask considered questions and be open to hearing what they have to say, without judgement or condition - approaching the conversation with an open mind.

Provide reassurance. Reassure them where you can and be positive, encouraging and supportive - offering your support in a way that feels right for the situation. This doesn't mean being an expert who knows all of the answers or having to take the problem on yourself.

Exercise empathy. You don't have to have experienced something personally to be able to empathise with others. Walk with them in their frame not your own, to help understand what they're going through. Don't share your own story either, unless you're really sure it will help.

Demonstrate patience and tolerance. It may take time for them to be comfortable talking freely with you, and that's ok. This doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong – we each process in our own way and at our own pace. Trust and confidence take time to build.

Below are a few things to think about when approaching mental health conversations with your team members or other people you may be supporting – to help you feel equipped and able to respond in a way that's helpful and encourages the person to continue talking.

Remember, a person's reluctance to open up or enter into a conversation may not be a reflection on their relationship with you or how much they trust you, but rather, the result of reactions they've had from other people in the past – whether at work or in their personal life. Or, as mentioned earlier, this could reflect a discomfort about how such conversations might come up in their performance discussions. So think about how you can make them feel safe and reassured that such conversations will be entered into without judgement or reprisal. In the current environment, where everyone's bar has shifted and we're all experiencing our own set of challenges – it's important people understand they're not expected to demonstrate unwavering resilience at all times and that asking for help and support doesn't mean they're not resilient. Instead, it's about finding ways for us all to navigate and cope with our current reality.

Often, we may find it difficult to have conversations where the other person is clearly struggling – especially if we don't have an obvious reference point from our own lives or feel ill equipped to talk about things we maybe don't fully understand. But supporting someone isn't about having specialist knowledge, it's about being there and doing what you can to provide comfort and reassurance at a point in time when they need it. Ultimately, it's about creating human connection. Checking in on someone's mental health doesn't need to be a specific meeting framed in that way – you can include it at the start of a normal interaction and if it develops, allow the conversation to go on for as long as necessary.

Below are a few things to think about:

Don't go into the conversation expecting to be able to 'fix' things (this is not your role). Instead, **generously offer your kindness and empathy** and see where the conversation goes. Don't try to over simplify or rationalise their experience – instead, **let the conversation flow**.

Acknowledge how they're feeling and remind them it's ok not to feel ok. They may be feeling ashamed, worried, vulnerable, fragile or apprehensive about having to explain or justify their feelings to you or others. **Try to remove any pressure** where you can and remind them you're there to support them without bias.

Just be there. You don't need to know all the answers or even fully understand what they're going through yourself. **Think about body language** – demonstrate a position which shows them you've stopped everything to hear what they have to say. Don't look at screens or a buzzing mobile phone - look at the person directly.

Ask twice. If you don't get a response the first time you ask, don't give up – frame your question differently and ask again or come back to it another time. Continue reminding them you're there to listen. Depending on the person, patience and persistence may be required.

Practice being a good listener. Listening and listening with interest are different things. It's really important that you process what's being said to you - take it seriously and support. A good listener will provide a **safe space** to talk, listen and offer **caring responses**, along with ongoing opportunities for the conversation to continue.

Each day will be different. Some days the person may feel more able to talk, whereas on other days the weight of what they're experiencing may feel overwhelming and hold them back from asking for help or responding honestly when asked if they're ok. It may feel easier just to say 'Yes, I'm fine', even if they're not.

Mental health is a very individual experience – which is different for everyone and reflects the fabric and texture of their life. It can be difficult to talk about and fully understand when you're not experiencing it yourself and there are no definite or 'right' answers – so be kind to yourself and support in whatever way you can.

Try not to react emotively if you're personally struggling to comprehend what they're experiencing. **If you're unsure, seek some guidance** and then try again. When people open up, being told things like "don't be silly" or "why would you think like that?" is not helpful and can reaffirm insecurities and impact confidence further.

Keep an open dialogue going and ensure they continue to feel heard and supported. Think about how you can demonstrate you're in their corner and you've got their back. Even if this is just planting the seed in someone's mind that opening up and talking about what they're feeling (even if not with you) will really help.

Seek to understand their experience more. You could ask them to explain to you in their own words how they're feeling, rather than trying to put words in their mouth or draw comparisons from your own life – as those comparisons may not be there to be made and doing this could be more harmful than helpful.

Starting a conversation

This may not be as difficult as you think. Perhaps you're worried the person in question doesn't want to talk to you about their mental health. If they don't, that's ok – you can't force them to. Or maybe you're afraid you won't know how to help or respond in the right way. But remember, there's lots of support available to help you and starting a conversation could make a big difference in someone's life, today. The main thing is to position your conversation in the most natural way possible – open up a normal 121 or keeping in touch with a 'check in' – as it's unlikely you'll get anywhere with a meeting called "mental health".

Ask simple questions

Asking questions leaves the other person in control of where the conversation goes and what they share, and may help them find the way to their own answers. Start with 'How are you?' But remember, this may not always be an easy question for someone to answer and they may struggle to articulate a straightforward answer. So when you ask, make sure you really listen to their response – not only hearing the words they're saying but also keeping a close eye on their body language, for any clues and cues this may give you. Once they've responded, follow your gut and trust your instincts. For example: if their "I'm fine thanks" didn't feel quite right to you or sounded a bit off compared to their normal response, then perhaps try framing the question differently and revisiting to explore a bit further. You could acknowledge the tough landscape and reference generically that it's really difficult for everyone.

Use tactful and gentle phrases and questions such as: 'Are you ok?', 'Is there anything you'd like to talk about?', 'I'd really like to help', 'I've been concerned about you – is there any way I can help?', or 'How are things at home at the moment?'

But remember, when you 'How can I help?' or 'What can I do?', the person themselves may not know the answer to this and it could be something you explore and work out together – or with help from others. Try not to get frustrated if they say 'I don't know' in response.

Questions to avoid include 'Why do you feel like that?' (sounds like a challenge, so may put them on the defensive or feel like they've been put on the spot). Also phrases like 'Don't worry' or 'I'm sure it will be fine' are best avoided. They may be well intended but will not be helpful at that point in time. It's essential to avoid responding to what they're saying in a way which appears to reject how they're feeling. For example: 'Surely it's not that bad' - such comments can be very isolating and may stop them from opening up again in the future.





Pause or take it slow

Don't rush a response or put pressure on the person to talk to you straight away if they're not ready to do so. Be prepared for the fact that this might be a conversation you need to ease into and/or revisit multiple times before they feel comfortable opening up and you're able to get to the crux of what's on their mind (as above, they may not know themselves). Be mindful of the impact your questions could have on them – for example: if they've not spoken openly about this before they may feel put on the spot and in the moment struggle to formulate an answer or piece together the thoughts they're having in a way that makes sense to others.

If you've not had a mental health conversation with this person before, it could help to talk about other things first to ease into the conversation in a more natural way. This could involve seeking to find some common ground (perhaps a shared hobby or experience) or talking about something you know they're passionate about. Starting on a casual conversation might then allow you to open the door into a different conversation, where you explore how they really are on a deeper level, as you've created an environment where they'll hopefully feel more comfortable talking about their challenges and struggles.

It's really important you don't pressure people to talk if they're not ready, as this could have the opposite impact and cause them to close themselves off from any such conversation even more. Respect their right to privacy and work at their pace. But equally, if they're not ready to talk now that doesn't mean you should avoid trying again at another time.

Be there

Provide reassurance and remind the person it's ok to feel how they're feeling - particularly given the current situation. It's more important than ever at the moment that people don't suffer in silence.

When someone's talking to you about how they're feeling and their current experience, it can be difficult to know how to respond but there are a couple of things definitely not to do: don't make comparisons to others, yourself included (this will not be helpful and is likely to make them feel judged and measured) and don't make them feel like they have to justify or explain how they're feeling (suggests they're in the wrong or shouldn't be feeling how they do which is untrue and unfair on them). Also don't assume they have control over what they're experiencing – the situation they find themselves in may be wholly or partly out of their control and they're responding in the best way they know how.

Sometimes all you need to do is listen – plain and simple. This doesn't mean fixing the problem or finding a solution – it means having an open mind and listening to what they have to say. Don't feel like you have to fill any pauses or silences with words for the sake of it – these natural breaks in the conversation may provide the space and time they need to further formulate their thoughts or reflect on what they're going to say next. This simple act of providing space and time can be very powerful in itself.

And even if someone says they don't need your support, be there anyway – they may need it more than they're letting on or more than they realise themselves. And also, if the person has not responded this time, your efforts will be remembered and they'll know they can talk to you again.

How can you be an active listener?

Active listening is an easy thing to do. And while it may be simple, it can be extremely powerful and help you create a safe and trusting space, where people feel more comfortable opening up. In essence, it's simply listening to what the other person has to say and occasionally providing responses which acknowledge what they've shared and encourage them to keep talking. The key is to input enough to get them talking and keep them talking, without influencing or shaping what they're saying too much. A good active listener helps others to talk through their problems, no matter how hard they're finding it to put these problems into words – allowing them to get it off their chest and feel a weight lifted. By acting as a sounding board an active listener avoids saying things which may bring the conversation to a halt.



Ask open questions

Try where possible to stick with open questions in place of those requiring only a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Where someone's hesitant to talk, they'll be less inclined to share details unprompted. You can use open questions to try and elicit examples – helping you explore their individual circumstances in a way that's more helpful for them. Open questions expand the conversation rather than providing opportunities for it to be closed down. Use questions to encourage them to explore their thoughts, even if this means a pivot away from where the conversation started. Example: Try asking "How long have you been experiencing these feelings?" not "Have you felt this way for long?" .

Summarise

Repeating back a summary of what they've said, in your own words, demonstrates you've been listening fully and attentively to what's been said and is also a way for you to check your understanding. This can help to avoid any confusion further into the conversation, if you've perhaps misinterpreted something they've said early on or made an assumption about their meaning, drawn from your own experiences as opposed to using their frame of reference.

Reflect

Playing back or repeating words and phrases the person has used themselves can further demonstrate you've heard and understood what they've said. This acknowledgement may encourage them to open up further and continue talking. Listen, pause, reflect and playback to maintain momentum and ensure they feel heard throughout. Try to remember names of family members or others that may be relevant to the situation and play these into the conversation where you can – it can show a sense of connectivity to their circumstances.

Clarify

When something is difficult or uncomfortable to talk about, we'll often find ways to skirt around the edges or gloss over details we're struggling to explore (which often turn out to be the most important details) – or we'll seek any opportunity to avoid saying what we really want or need to say. If the person you're speaking to does just this, loop back for clarification. This will be helpful for both you, as the listener, and them. If they're still processing and unpicking things themselves, this will give them further space to do so. Example: Try saying, 'Tell me more about...' or '...sounds like a challenging area for you.'

React

During these conversations, displaying emotion is ok - you don't need to remain completely neutral or void of expression – it's ok to react. If the person you're speaking to has shared something particularly emotive and it's clear they've had a tough time, then showing sympathy, empathy, compassion and understanding is important. Example: Consoling phrases such as 'That must have been difficult for you' or 'You've had a tough time of it recently'.

External Support



Phone: Call free, any time day or night, on 116 123. A Samaritan is available to support, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Email: The Samaritans can also be contacted via email on jo@samaritans.org, with a response time of 24 hours.

Letter: The postal address is: Chris, Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, STIRLING, FK8 2SA.



Phone: To talk to someone, call the Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393. Or you can text on 86463. The Infoline provides an information and signposting service - open 9am to 6pm, Mon-Fri (except bank holidays)

Email: They can also be contacted via email on info@mind.org.uk

Post: Or via post at Mind Infoline, PO Box 75225, London, E15 9FS.

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