

## Top tips for having a conversation about stress

### Prior to the conversation

Be aware that:

- the cause may be highly personal and sensitive
- the cause may not be concerned with the business or working environment
- the conversation may result in opening a can of worms, meaning there will be a lot of follow-up support required – this shouldn't stop you having the conversation but you need to be prepared for this to be an issue which requires ongoing management
- the problem may be easily solved by early and informal help from the line manager and organisation, for example, allowing the individual time off to solve the problem themselves.

The initial approach should therefore always be that the person knows that they have a problem and needs a bit of help and/or latitude to resolve it on a person-to-person basis. Only if the initial response to an offer to help an individual cope is rejected or the concern is denied should the situation be formalised and a manager–subordinate conversation, albeit a sensitive one, be set up.

### Setting up the conversation

- Consider how urgent the need is to see them and respond accordingly – that is, have you observed a dramatic emotional outburst or more subtle symptoms over time?
- Approach the individual when they are on their own.
- Take an informal approach as they may not have admitted to themselves that there is a problem – 'I'd like to have a chat about how things are going...' but, be clear that it's not just a 'social chat at the coffee machine'.
- Agree on a mutually convenient time to have the discussion.
- Set aside around half an hour and arrange cover for them if necessary.
- Arrange a private space where there will be no interruptions (in the workplace if at all possible). Sit next to each other or around a coffee table, rather than talking across your desk.

### Establishing purpose of the conversation

Be clear and explicit about the purpose of the conversation from the outset:

- You want to help.
- Emphasise that it is not a disciplinary or formal performance review.
- Explain that as their manager you have identified some changes in behaviour that are concerning you and suggest they may be finding it difficult to cope.
- Avoid the temptation to launch into behavioural examples straight away, even if they ask for them – assure them that you will come on to these, but you want to set out the purpose of the conversation first.
- Explain that you want to understand any stress-related issues or problems and what the causes might be.

- Be clear that it is in their benefit to have an open and honest discussion. The main objective is to begin to identify a suitable way forward to help and support them if necessary.
- Try to strike a balance between beginning a formal process and taking a sensitive approach.
- Reiterate that you want to help.

### **Confidentiality**

- Establish confidentiality before you get into any discussion and discuss any exceptions that might apply.
- Tell the individual that you will inform them of anything you feel you need to disclose and why.
- Reinforce that the main reason for the conversation is to offer support and help.
- Explain that you will be up front about what is agreed and as far as possible you will agree the way forward together.

### **Opening questions**

- Ask an open question to begin with, for example: 'How do you feel things are going at the moment?'
- Try to create an open and relaxed environment.
- If relevant, explore whether there are any obvious reasons for recent behaviour, for example a difficult situation at work, a poor appraisal.
- If they say nothing or don't want to talk about it
- Make a concerted effort to encourage them to open up, but don't push too hard – use your judgement.
- Only if this fails, ask if they would like to talk to anyone else instead (for example, a manager one level up) or refer on to an occupational health specialist if there is clearly a problem – ensure reasons for referral are clear.
- Explain that whatever is going on needs to be addressed as it's affecting their behaviour and/or work effectiveness.
- Explain that you will need to be kept informed of what support the individual takes up and the outcome of this.

### **If they think everything is going fine:**

- Start to feed back the specific behaviours you have seen and ask for their interpretation – without being confrontational.
- Be open to the fact that it may have been a short-term issue and there's actually no need for intervention – but agree to monitor the situation.

### **If they get angry or emotional:**

- Don't be afraid to let them get it out of their system.
- Explain that you're here to help, whenever they're ready to talk – you may need to schedule another time to talk if they're not ready now but, don't use this option too readily.
- Ask them what they would like to do from here.

- Offer understanding and sympathy.
- LISTEN, but take control of the situation.
- Remember you can cope with their reaction and focus on finding the best way forward.

### **Feedback your observations**

- Start to feedback what you have seen behaviourally and why it is concerning you.
- Refer to specific, recent behavioural examples – stick to the facts, rather than your opinions and perspective, for example: ‘I saw you behaving like this, which isn’t typical for you.’ Avoid vague statements like: ‘You’re just not yourself at the moment.’
- Have the examples ready in front of you.
- Avoid being accusatory or jumping to conclusions – just focus on what you have seen or heard from others (if validated).
- Encourage them to offer their interpretation and comments on what you’ve said.
- If you both agree that there may be stress-related issues, lead into a discussion around what the issues and causes might be.

### **Explore causes and problems**

- As an initial screening question, ask whether the issues are largely home- or work-related.
- If home-related, refer on to seek appropriate support. You can’t be expected to solve an individual’s home-based problems for them – you can only signpost the relevant support.
- If work-related, introduce the HSE’s Management Standards for work-related stress use this as a framework, for example, if the problem is due to relationships with a colleague, you will need to explore this area in more detail.
- Try to get a feel for whether the problem is consistent and underlying or temporary.
- Be open to consider yourself as part of the problem.
- If the individual regards you as the problem – refer up to the next level.

### **Taking it forward**

Agree and document (if necessary) the following:

- follow-up meeting (if necessary)
- specific approach (could be ‘do nothing’)
- responsibilities – that is, you may need to go and find out what’s possible in terms of interventions
- give as much control to the individual as possible – for example, ask them to go and find out about training course options and report back
- timescales
- any third party involvement required.

The documentation is for the manager and the member of staff – unless it needs to be part of a referral process.

### **Follow-up conversations**

- Aim to have a follow-up conversation with the individual within 1 month to check any progress made.
- Review progress against the agreed approach – has anything changed?
- Is the agreed approach still appropriate and relevant? If not, make revisions and set new timescales.
- The number of follow-up meetings will vary.
- When the time is right, ensure that you and the individual have a closure meeting to draw a line under it.