

# HOW TO ASK R U OK? AT WORK

A practical guide for the workplace



**R U OK?**<sup>TM</sup>  
A conversation could change a life.



## Content expertise

This resource was developed with the input and oversight from The Centre for Corporate Health; recognised as leading experts in building resilient workplaces.

## Why use this?

We've developed this practical guide to help you ask, "Are you OK?" of any team member or workmate you're worried about and then respond appropriately and safely to anyone who says, "No, I'm not OK."





# What's in the guide?

Simple, practical tools to help you:

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# What are the signs someone might need some extra support?

Over the last fortnight, have you noticed two or more of the below?

- 1 Changes in their physical appearance?**
  - Look more tired than usual
  - Seem "flat" or drained of energy
  - Have had a pattern of illness or being constantly run down
  - Are complaining of physical health issues such as headaches/migraines
  - Are eating much more or much less than usual
  - Are drinking more alcohol than usual
  - Seem more fidgety and nervous than usual
- 2 Changes in mood?**
  - Seem more irritable, snappy or fly off the handle when they normally wouldn't
  - Appear more anxious and worried about everything i.e. work and personal life
  - React more emotionally than the situation warrants
  - Are quick to anger
  - Appear to be overwhelmed by tasks that they had previously found manageable

### 3 Changes in behaviour?

- Seem more withdrawn than usual
- Don't seem to enjoy hobbies/interests they once did
- Seem to have difficulty concentrating or seem constantly distracted
- Are taking on more work to avoid being in social situations with others
- Are not performing to their usual standard

### 4 Changes in how thoughts are expressed?

- Struggles to see a positive side e.g. "It's always terrible..."
- Seem to think the worst e.g. they might conclude that two people in a meeting are discussing their performance or future in the workplace
- Personalise situations e.g. "I knew I'd get the toughest roster – they've got it in for me"
- Saying things that sound more confused or irrational
- Complain they have difficulty switching off

If you have noticed two or more of these changes, they might need some extra support.

**It's time for you to start a conversation.**



# Simple steps to talk to a staff member who's not ok

## Getting ready to ask



1. Be ready



2. Be prepared



3. Pick your moment

## Starting a conversation



1. Ask R U OK?



2. Listen



3. Encourage action



4. Check in





## Getting ready to ask



### 1. Be ready

- Are you in a good headspace?
- Are you willing to genuinely listen?
- Can you give as much time as needed?



### 2. Be prepared

- Remember that you won't have all the answers (which is OK)
- Listening is one of the most important things you can do
- If someone is talking about personal struggles this can be difficult and they might get emotional, embarrassed or upset



### 3. Pick your moment

- Have you chosen somewhere relatively private and informal?
- What time will be good for them to chat? Ideally try and put aside at least an hour so you have ample time to have a meaningful chat
- If they can't talk when you approach them, ask them for a better time to come back

## Starting a conversation



### 1. Ask R U OK?

- Be relaxed
- Help them open up by asking questions like "How you going?" or "What's been happening?" or "I've noticed that you're not quite yourself lately. How are you travelling?"
- Make an observation. Mention specific things that have made you concerned for them, like "I've noticed that you seem really tired recently" or "You seem less chatty than usual. How are you going?"



## 2. Listen

- Take what they say seriously
- Don't interrupt or rush the conversation
- If they need time to think, try and sit patiently with the silence
- Encourage them to explain
- If they get angry or upset, stay calm and don't take it personally
- Let them know you're asking because you're concerned



## 3. Encourage action

- Ask them: "Where do you think we can go from here?"
- Ask: "What would be a good first step we can take?"
- Ask: "What do you need from me? How can I help?"
- Good options for action might include talking to family, a trusted friend, their doctor or Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

## Local contacts

- Record your local EAP contact here, so you can pass it on:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Record another local health service here, so you can pass it on:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Record the contact details for your Human Resources Department here:  
\_\_\_\_\_



## 4. Check in

- Remember to check in and see how the person is doing in a few days' time
- Ask if they've found a better way to manage the situation
- If they haven't done anything, keep encouraging them and remind them you're always here if they need a chat
- Understand that sometimes it can take a long time for someone to be ready to see a professional
- Try to reinforce the benefits of seeking professional help and trying different avenues
- You could ask, "Do you think it would be useful if we looked into finding some professional or other support?"

# How to manage emotional reactions in a conversation

From time to time, we can all be faced with strong reactions from our workmates, particularly if we're supporting someone who is struggling.

Here are some things you can do to minimise awkwardness and reduce the pressure in these situations:

- Be prepared
- Recognise their reaction may be in response to a range of circumstances - both personal and work related - many of which you might not know about
- Allow the person to express their emotions fully (i.e. let off steam) and show them that you're interested by actively listening to all they say
- Deal with the emotions first, you can then discuss the issues more rationally once emotions have been addressed
- Being a good listener is one of the best things you can do for someone when they are distressed
- Manage your own emotions by staying calm and not taking things personally
- Validate their response but keep the focus on the issue at hand

# How do I deal with anger?

- If someone is visibly hostile you can respond with: "I can see that this has upset you. Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me what I need to know..."
- Allow them to identify all the factors they feel are contributing to their anger
- You might encourage them by adding "Right, I understand that... is also a problem. What else is causing you concern?"
- Be patient and prepared to listen to them itemise all the points
- Use active listening to keep the conversation on track and to reassure them that you are interested in all they say
- If they feel they have been wronged or treated unfairly you are unlikely to persuade them otherwise in this conversation. It's more constructive to listen to all they have to say and provide resources and formal channels for specific complaints to be heard



# How do I deal with anxiety?

- Speak in short, concise sentences but still showing concern and care
- If you anticipate an anxious response, use your preparation time to construct your message in clear, brief sentences
- Make sure you appear calm. This is best displayed through deep, slow breathing, a lower tone of voice and evenly paced speech

# How do I deal with sadness?

- Sad or tragic stories are often difficult to deal with because we empathise with the person and feel helpless as we cannot take away their sadness or pain
- Use lots of empathetic phrases, such as “It sounds like you’re juggling a few things at the moment” or “I understand this must be challenging for you right now”
- Ensure that the best internal support is available, such as the EAP
- Make sure you’re comfortable with any silence in the conversation
- Know that silence gives them permission to add more and to tell you everything
- If someone begins to cry, sit quietly and allow them to cry. Lowering your eyes can minimise their discomfort. You could add, “I’m going to sit here with you and when you’re ready we can keep talking”
- If you anticipate this response, make sure you have tissues handy

# What if they don’t want to talk to me?

- Try not to take it personally. It may take them time to process what you’re saying and respond.
- Focus on the things they’re comfortable talking about like, “I know you’ve had trouble sleeping and concentrating lately. Can we talk about that?”
- Suggest they talk to someone they trust, like a family member or friend. You could say, “You can always call me if you ever want to chat. But is there someone else you’d rather talk to?”

# Useful contacts for someone who’s not OK

Encourage them to call on these Australian crisis lines and professionals:

## **Lifeline (24/7)**

13 11 14

[lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

## **beyondblue (24/7)**

1300 224 636

[beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

## **Suicide Call Back Service (24/7)**

1300 659 467

[suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

## **SANE Australia:**

1800 18 SANE (7263)

[sane.org](http://sane.org)

**More contacts:** [ruok.org.au/findhelp](http://ruok.org.au/findhelp)



# **RUOK?**<sup>TM</sup>

A conversation could change a life.

**ruok.org.au**

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