Blue Cross® VIRTUAL WELL-BEING

Supporting employees with personal challenges, Parts 1 and 2

Language matters: Questions to ask and avoid

Questions to ask	Questions to avoid
How are you doing at the moment?	You're clearly struggling. What's up?
You seem to be a bit down/upset/under pressure/ frustrated/angry. Is everything okay?	Why can't you just get your act together?
I've noticed you've been arriving late recently and I wondered if you're okay?	What do you expect me to do about it?
I've noticed the reports are late when they usually are not. Is everything okay?	Your performance is really unacceptable right now – what's going on?
As your manager, what can I do to help?	Everyone else is in the same boat and they're okay. Why aren't you?
What would you like to happen? How?	Who do you expect to pick up all the work that you can't manage?
What support do you think might help?	
Where have you looked for help with this? A doctor, counselor?	

Employee substance use: Do's and don'ts

Do:
- Emphasize that you care about the person, and are focused on his or her work performance
- Have documentation of work performance when you talk to the employee
- Remember that many problems get worse without assistance
- Emphasize that the Employee Assistance Program, if applicable, is confidential
- Explain that the EAP, if applicable, is voluntary and there to help the employee
- Call the EAP, if applicable, to discuss how you make a referral

Don't:
- Try to diagnose the problem
- Moralize; limit comments to job performance or conduct issues
- Discuss alcohol and drug use; stick to the topic of performance on the job
- Be misled by sympathy-evoking tactics
- Cover up; if you protect people, it enables them to stay the same
- Make threats you don't intend to carry out; If you threaten disciplinary action, you must follow through

Responding to employee distress or mental health disclosures

Handling sensitive employee disclosures is often viewed with fear by line managers, but it doesn't need to be awkward or taxing. The aim is to create an honest and open dialogue that will lead to a system of support and understanding between employers and employees.

Generally, a common-sense approach based on open communication and good people management is all that's required. The rules of thumb are:

Avoid making assumptions
- It can be difficult to disclose personal information, so make it easier by keeping an open mind and giving your employee space to talk it out.
- Avoid trying to guess symptoms and how they might affect an employee's ability to do his or her job.
- Remember, many people can manage personal challenges and perform their role to a high standard.

Embed confidentiality
- People can be anxious about sharing personal experiences, so be prepared to assume responsibility for some confidential and sensitive information.
- Create strict disclosure policies. As a rule, they should involve as few people as possible.
- Offer reassurance that any private information won't be leaked to colleagues.
- Discuss any information the employee would like you to share with team colleagues and how, as this can be very supportive for some people.

Encourage people to talk

- It's important to have an open dialogue when discussing an employee's mental health or other challenges.
- Remember, everyone's life experience is different; how you deal with a disclosure should be entirely dependent on the individual.
- Explore the situation at the employee's comfort level, what the implications are and what support he or she needs.

Respond flexibly
- Crises and mental health problems affect people in different ways and at different times in their lives, so be prepared to adapt your support to suit the individual.
- Remember, workplace adjustments for a personal crisis or mental health condition don't need to be costly or require huge changes — they can be simple.
- Be aware of the steps to take if you're concerned the employee may be having suicidal feelings. Guide him or her to seek help from a doctor, EAP, emergency room or mental health crisis center.

Seek advice if you need to
- If you think the person lacks insight, or an issue is particularly complex, seek advice from administrative colleagues and supervisors.
- Consider using workplace mediation to help resolve issues when workplace relationships are strained or confrontational.
- Employers in larger companies may find occupational health colleagues useful as they can negotiate disclosure issues for employees and managers. Remember that once you're aware of health or disability information, you have legal duties to consider, such as making reasonable adjustments as well as a general duty of care and responsibility for employee health and personal injury prevention.

Supporting employees:
Possible adjustments

- Changes to start and finish times
- Change of workspace — quieter, less busy, dividing screens
- Changes to role (temporary or permanent)
- Equal amount of break time, but in shorter, more frequent chunks
- Extra training or coaching (during work hours)
- Flexible hours
- Increased supervision or support with managing workload
- Lightbox or seat with more natural light
- Mediation if there are difficulties between colleagues
- Mentor or buddy systems (formal or informal)
- Phased return to work; reduced hours gradually building back up
- Provision of quiet rooms
- Redeployment to a more suitable role
- Relaxing rules and limits for those with disability-related or sickness absences
- Temporary reallocation of some tasks
- Time off for appointments at short notice, if needed
- Working from home

Return-to-work checklist
While the employee is off sick, managers should:
- Regularly communicate with the individual by phone or email, while being mindful not to place undue pressure on the employee to return earlier than appropriate (the approach for all staff must be made clear in sickness procedures).
- Consider visiting the employee at home, but only with his or her consent.
- Communicate work issues to keep the employee in the loop.
  - Focus conversations on the individual's well-being.
  - Keep in touch with the individual's close colleagues about his or her health (only with the individual's consent).
  - Encourage work colleagues and other members of the organization to keep in touch with the individual.
  - Make it clear that the individual should not rush back to work.
  - Make it clear that the company will support the individual during his or her absence.
  - Reassure the individual that the job will be there when he or she returns.
  - Prevent the individual from pushing too much to return to work.

The initial return-to-work managers should:
- Consider giving the individual lighter duties or different jobs during the initial return to work.
- Incorporate a phased return to work for the individual, if appropriate.
- Remain objective when discussing return-to-work adaptations for the individual.
- Explain the return-to-work process and procedures to the individual before he or she returns.
- Explain any changes to the individual's role, responsibilities and work practices.
- Meet the individual on his or her first day back.
- Make the individual's first weeks back at work as low-stress as possible.
- Keep in regular contact with the returning employee and regularly ask if he or she is doing okay.

Managing the team
Managers should:
- Ask the individual about ongoing information that should be shared with colleagues.
- Make the individual feel appreciated by the organization.
- Encourage colleagues to help in the individual's rehabilitation process.
- Promote a positive team spirit.
- Regularly communicate with HR and occupational health (if this is available) and keep the individual informed.

General behavior
Managers should:
- Be proactive in arranging regular meetings to discuss the individual's condition and the possible impact on his or her work.
- Communicate openly.
- Listen to the individual's concerns.
- Understand that, despite looking fine, the individual may still be ill.
- Appreciate the individual's wishes.
- Have an open-door policy so the individual can approach you with any concerns.

How do I respond to someone who may be at risk for suicide?
Your response is crucial and may save a life. Don't wait to be certain the threat is real; it's important to discuss your concerns with the employee; be specific and clear about what you're seeing.

In many of these situations, other employees have noticed signs or reported hearing concerning comments and report it to the manager. When discussing your concerns be sure to:

- Have the conversation in a private place where you won't be interrupted.
- Bring up the concerns directly (from what you've witnessed or what has been reported to you).
- Offer your support and the support of the organization to assist in accessing help as needed. Your conversation could start like this: *"Steven, I was informed you made statements in the presence of coworkers about not wanting to be around anymore. This is very concerning for your coworkers and me, and we want to be sure you are okay. What's going on?"* or *"We want to support you in getting what you need. Can we talk about what that might be?"*
- Ask if the employee has had thoughts or intentions of killing him or herself. Some people are concerned this may "plant the seed" of suicide if the person hasn't been considering it. This is a common fear and deterrent for asking difficult questions. The reality, however, is that asking about it will probably be a relief for the person at risk. It gives the employee permission to talk about the issue and ask for and get help. "*Are you thinking about killing or hurting yourself?*" If the answer is "no," seek clarification of what was said and why. If the answer is vague or "*not really,*" this must be taken as a "yes" until you're able to seek further clarification on what the person means.
- Listen to concerns without minimizing them, giving advice or trying to make the individual feel better. This is the most valuable thing you can do.

What to say and not say to suicidal employees

These tips help to break the silence and invite the person to discuss what he or she is going through. Here are some recommendations about what to say.

Do say:
- "It sounds like it has been pretty rough for you lately."
- "I'm sorry to hear about your troubles. Would you like to talk about them?"
- "Thanks for sharing."
- "Is there anything I can do to help?"
- "I'm sorry to hear that. It must be tough."
- "I can't imagine what you're going through."
- "I'm here for you when you need me."

Don't say:
- "It could be worse."
- "Just deal with it."
- "Snap out of it."
- "Everyone feels that way sometimes."
- "You may have brought this on yourself."
- "We've all been there."
- "You've got to pull yourself together."
- "Maybe try thinking happier thoughts."
- "Oh man, that sucks."

When domestic violence comes to work

According to the Cambridge Public Health Department, if an employee reveals that he or she is in an abusive relationship, human resources should:
- Communicate your concerns for the employee's safety. It's important to ask the victim what changes could be made to make him or her feel safer.
- Tell the employee that you believe him or her.
- Refer the employee to an EAP.
- Be clear that your role is to try to help and not to judge.

*Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and Blue Care Network don't own or control these websites.

- Consult with security staff if there is a concern about workplace safety.

Resources:

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE™
1-800-273-TALK
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

The National Domestic Violence HOTLINE
1.800.799.SAFE (7233) • 1.800.787.3224 (TTY)

"Recognizing Mental Health Issues in Your Employees"

youtu.be/mABH2vD_e0U*

"Supporting Employees with Mental Health Conditions"

youtu.be/K5qMRhvSMCA*

Source: New Directions

The information in this document is intended only as an educational tool and for general informational purposes. It is not intended to, nor shall it, constitute specific medical advice or services.