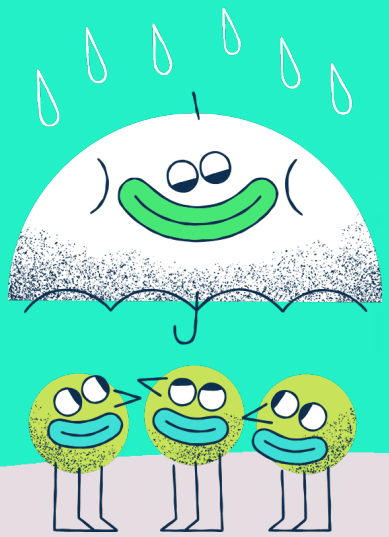
HAVING SENSITIVE CONVERSATIONS

This toolkit aims to guide you through offering your teammates some gentle support through potentially challenging or distressing times.



Sometimes we avoid talking about sensitive topics because we feel awkward, we're worried about upsetting someone, or we don't want to make things worse.

We understand that it can be hard to know what to say in situations where someone's suffering, but it's always better to address this (than to ignore it altogether). This unspoken 'thing' can create barriers in conversations, and really stands in the way of us being able to support peers.

If you feel like a colleague could be struggling with something (whatever the reason may be), the compassionate thing to do is to check in with them.

Name the elephant in the room

APPROACHING THE DIFFICULT TOPIC

Take personal opinions out of the equation

Suffering is suffering and no matter your opinion their situation, it is important to acknowledge this.

We are not offering support if we are using the conversation as an opportunity to put our views or opinions across. This goes for any sensitive topic.

If we are looking to support someone, we need to focus on the individual and their feelings. **If you don't feel able to do this, then it is better not to raise the conversation with someone.**

Offering practical support

If you know that someone is having a difficult time, why not offer some practical support?

If it seems like the individual finds it overwhelming to think about where they need support, try suggesting something specific and tangible. For example – 'I can finish that client proposal you were working on.' Or 'I can shift that meeting we had in the schedule to next week?'

How are you doing today?

Sometimes asking 'how are you' is not enough to convey our compassion or concern for that individual – it doesn't acknowledge that anything out of the ordinary is going on...

So, if you know that someone is going through a difficult time, try asking them 'how are you doing today' instead. This simple change in language shows that you are aware things are difficult and that each day might be challenging for them.

Respecting boundaries

Boundaries are very important in this context – we do not want to force someone to open up.

If someone seems reluctant to talk about what is happening, you must respect that. You can always offer a statement like: 'I want you to know that I'm here as and when you may need some support.'

Remember too that boundaries can change. Just because a conversation was 'within the limits' doesn't mean it can't be 'off-limits' in the future.

HOW TO HOLD SPACE FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Use the below framework to start sensitive, safe conversations with your colleagues.

1. Name 'the elephant'

Mention the difficult topic specifically and at the top of the conversation:

i.e. "I wanted to check in with you to see how you are given the situation. I can imagine things might be difficult because of X conflict and wanted to make sure you know I'm around if you wanted to talk."

2. Ask open questions

Asking open-ended questions (i.e. questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no) allows the speaker to share their experience in their own words.

Don't assume or force the subject.

3. Actively listen

If the individual opens up, employ active listening.

We all relate to situations from our own frame of reference, which means we can often recentre conversations around ourselves (without noticing). Instead, really hear what the person is saying without interjecting and remember silences are OK too.

Please note

Making sure that you are really present in the conversation is especially important when communicating virtually. If you're on video, things like looking into the camera will help the person feel like you are looking at them. If you're on an audio call, non-verbal cues can help reassure someone that you are listening.

4. Allow for difficult emotions

Hold space for *all* emotions. Just being there during difficult emotions can be a comfort.

Emotions may run high, or there may be no emotion. We never know how someone is going to react in any given situation - we never know what other experiences or traumas their situation might be touching on.

5. What your role is not

It's not your responsibility to try to 'fix' things or to be a therapist. When looking at others' difficult circumstances and/or feelings, there is no tangible way that we as individuals can make it all better. But we can make people feel supported by being there to listen. You can always suggest some resources for people to use if they need extra support.