

What you need to know about Supporting a co-worker with a mental illness

If you think that your co-worker may be experiencing a mental illness, it's best to let them decide what and how much they tell others in the workplace. However, you can still offer support. Let your co-worker know that you're there to listen without judgement, and make them feel like they're still part of the team. Here are more tips for supporting a co-worker:

◆ Listen

- Listen mindfully; be present and focused on the individual speaking.
- Give your co-worker the space to express what they need to say.
- Avoid advice giving.

◆ Don't jump to conclusions

- Signs of mental health challenges do not necessarily mean someone is experiencing a mental illness.
 - ⇒ Serious life stressors may cause behavioural changes.
- Do not explicitly ask "Are you depressed?" or "Are you having some mental health issues?" or questions to that effect.
 - ⇒ Your co-worker may not be willing or ready to talk about it.
- We are unqualified to diagnose anyone
- Labelling others adds to stigma.

◆ Be compassionate; ask if you can help

- Express concern rather than requesting to know what is going on. Be authentic and compassionate.
- Phrases like "that sounds like it must be difficult", or "if I hear you correctly, you feel...", etc. can help to validate their feelings while

remaining neutral and not agreeing or disagreeing with what they are saying.

- If they open up to you and share their troubles, it's okay to ask them if there's anything you can do to help.
 - ⇒ Rather than a vague "How can I help you?", try to be specific with your offers to help when possible.
- If sharing your own experience - make sure it is relevant to your co-worker's situation, and that you are sharing from the "I".

◆ Frame comments as observations of change

- Describe the changes you have seen and keep your descriptions of those changes behavior-based.
 - ⇒ Focus on behaviours you have personally witnessed or experienced versus relying on second-hand descriptions.

◆ Offer to connect the individual to resources

- Offer to connect them with your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Offer your coworker the EAP number in a non-judgmental way (e.g., "if you're interested...", or "a lot of people have found this helpful").
 - ⇒ If you don't know your company's specific EAP, refer your colleague to your Human Resources (HR) department.
 - ⇒ If your company does not have any of those resources, then encourage your co-worker to connect with their physician or a psychologist.

◆ Encourage on-going self-care and responsibility

- It is okay to follow up and ask how your co-worker is doing. However, it is a breach of privacy to ask if they have accessed the EAP or other resources.
- Avoiding “shoulding”. While you may think you have great ideas about what your co-worker should do, it is disempowering and potentially misleading to try and take control of their situation.
- Instead, focus on empowering your co-worker’s self care by being empathetic and supportive, providing information, and then letting them make their own choices in recovery.

◆ Reinforce value of relationship

- Reflect on the achievements and contributions that your co-worker has made in the past and communicate this to them. Also let them know the qualities that you value in them.
- Continue to include your colleague in group activities and discourage office gossip about their situation.
 - ⇒ Be wary of using potentially triggering language

◆ Respect Confidentiality

- If you’re feeling overwhelmed and that you need to talk to someone else, it is vital that you respect your co-worker’s confidentiality.
 - ⇒ You can talk about how you’re feeling but be very careful not to share any identifying information or specific details that were shared with you in confidence.

◆ Look after yourself

- By supporting yourself with healthy habits like taking regular breaks, getting enough rest, eating regularly and not over-working, you can not only help yourself but also model best practices for your co-worker.

- Put up boundaries when necessary - you are not a therapist.
 - ⇒ If someone is continually turning to you for advice and support, gently let the person know that you are rooting for them but are not an expert. Refer to resources.

For these reasons and many more, every workplace can benefit from a comprehensive and integrated approach to:

- Recognizing and addressing mental illness issues
- Accessing support services
- Managing disability leave and return to work programs
- Providing workplace accommodations
- Creating healthy work environments

Refer your co-worker to our free, confidential and simple to use online mental health check-up:



- Learn more about mood disorders
- Find valuable resources to help themselves or their family members, or friends
- Can take the results directly to mental health professional or doctor

At **Mood Disorders Association of Ontario**, we value working with partners to create customized content, tailored to your organization’s specific needs.

Contact us to discuss how we can improve your organization’s workplace wellness.

We look forward to connecting with you!

The Mood Disorders Association of Ontario provides peer support, information and education. Our services are not intended as a replacement for other treatment options and we encourage individuals to seek treatment by a qualified health professional.



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