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# Best Practices for Workplace Mental Health Conversations

A practical guide to help managers normalize mental health discussions, connect with their teams, and navigate them to support.



# Contents



- 3 Getting Started
- 4 Why this matters
- 5 Why these conversations are hard
- 6 A simple framework for managers
- 7 Principles that build trust
- 8 What to say (and what to avoid)
- 9 Connecting employees to support
- 10 Building a supportive culture
- 11 How managers can take the next step

# Getting started



Creating a healthier, happier workplace doesn't happen all at once —it's built through everyday moments. As a manager, you play a key role in shaping how your team experiences work.

This toolkit is designed to support you in those moments. Inside, you'll find practical guidance to help you navigate mental health conversations with confidence, foster a culture of openness, and connect your team to the right support when it's needed.

You don't need to have all the answers. Small, thoughtful actions go a long way.

We're here to help you get started.

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# Why this matters



## Mental health drives wellbeing and performance

Mental health is one of the most pressing—and least openly discussed—drivers of employee wellbeing and organizational performance.

- **1 in 5 U.S. adults** experience a mental health condition each year<sup>1</sup>.
- Mental health challenges are a **leading driver** of absenteeism, presenteeism, and reduced productivity in the workplace<sup>2</sup>.
- Poor mental health costs the U.S. economy **tens of billions** annually in lost productivity and missed work<sup>3</sup>.
- Mental health challenges cost the global economy an estimated **\$1 trillion** each year in lost productivity.<sup>4</sup>

Managers are often the first line of support—but most aren't trained for these conversations. That gap creates risk for employees and missed opportunities for early support.

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2023). Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2022-nsduh-annual-national-report>

2. de Oliveira, C., & Saka, M. (2022). The role of mental health on workplace productivity: A critical review of the literature. *PharmacoEconomics*, 21(2), 167–193. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40258-022-00761-w>

3. Witters, D., & Agrawal, S. (2022, November 3). The economic cost of poor employee mental health. Gallup. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/404174/economic-cost-poor-employee-mental-health.aspx>

4. World Health Organization. (2024, September 2). Mental health at work. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work>

# Why these conversations are hard

**Even as awareness increases, meaningful conversations remain difficult.**

Common barriers include:

🗨️ Stigma and fear of professional consequences

🗨️ Uncertainty about what is appropriate to say

🗨️ Lack of training for managers

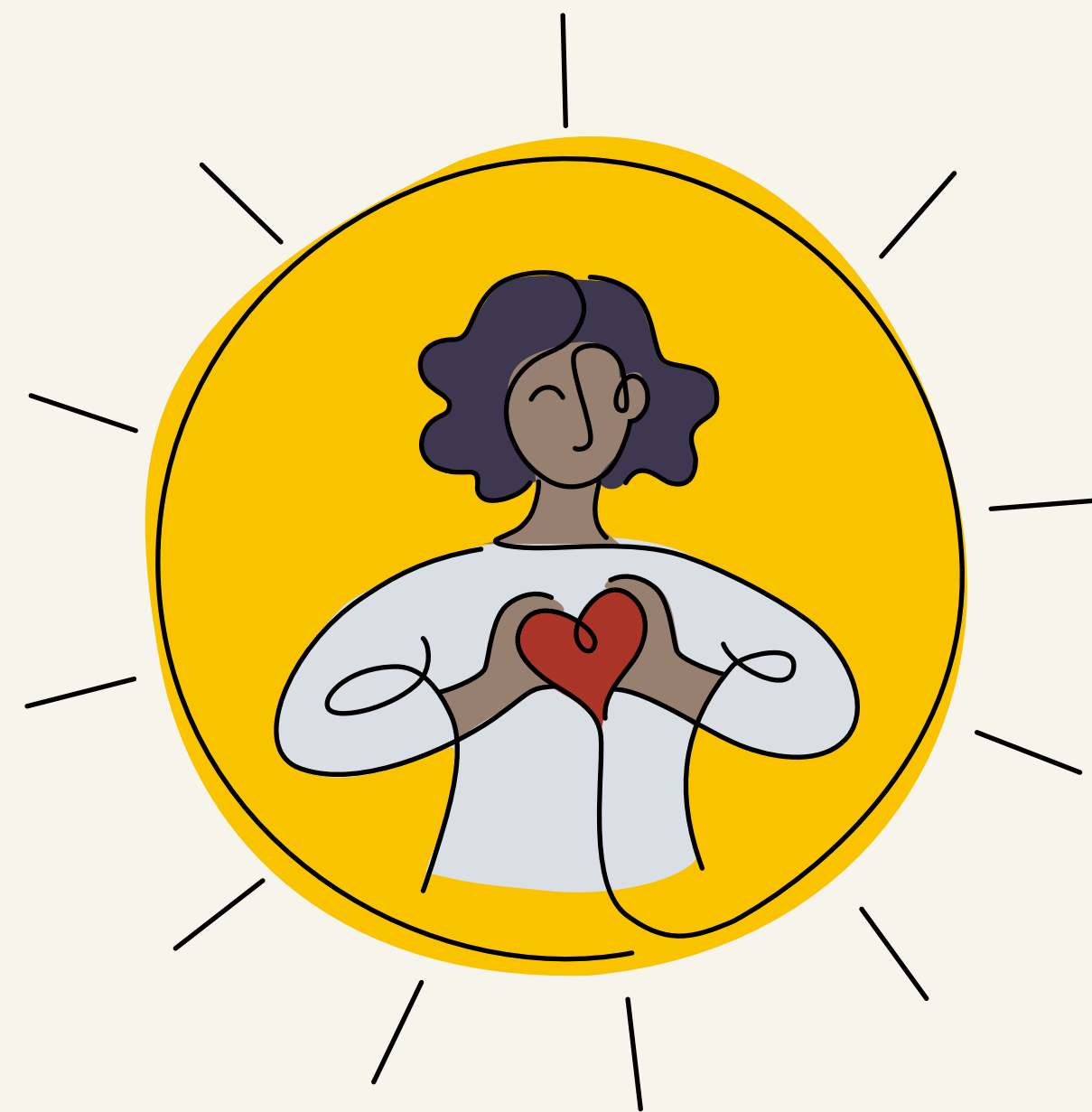
🗨️ Cultural norms that discourage vulnerability

Without clear guidance, many leaders avoid the topic altogether —or approach it in ways that feel clinical, impersonal, or unhelpful.



1. ...

# A simple framework for managers



## How to Approach the Conversation

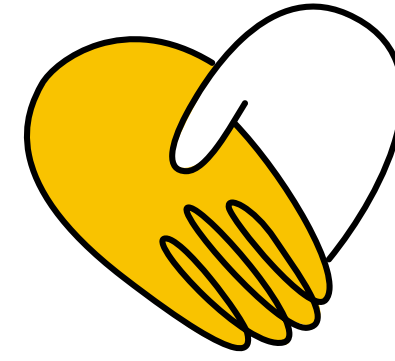
This framework keeps conversations grounded, human, and appropriate for the workplace.

Notice → Ask → Listen → Support → Follow up

1. **Notice** changes in behavior or workload signals
2. **Ask** open, non-assumptive questions
3. **Listen** without jumping to solutions
4. **Support** by offering flexibility and resources
5. **Follow up** to show ongoing care

# Principles that build trust

Strong conversations aren't about saying the perfect thing—they're about how you show up.



## **Lead with empathy**

Focus on listening, not fixing



## **Respect boundaries**

Employees don't need to share details



## **Use plain language**

Keep it human, not clinical

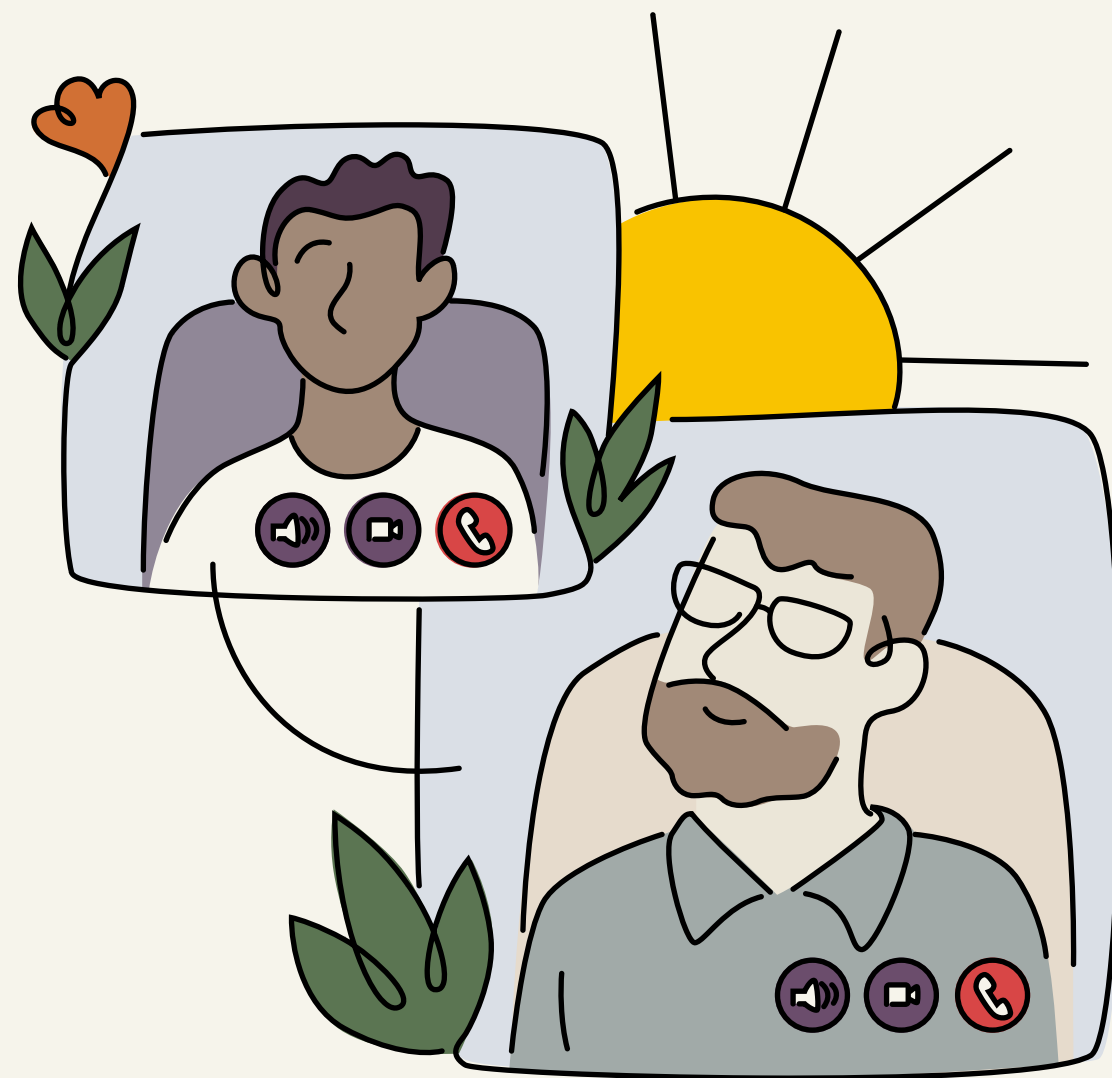


## **Focus on support**

Point to resources, including in-network care

# What to say (and what to avoid)

Managers often hesitate because they don't know the "right" words. Here are some examples to build confidence.



## Do say:

- “I’ve noticed you seem under a lot of pressure—how can I support you?”
- “You don’t have to go through this alone.”
- “Can I share some resources that others have found helpful?”

## Avoid saying:

- “What’s wrong with you?”
- “Everyone is stressed—just push through.”
- “Have you tried fixing it by...?”

# Connecting employees to support



**Mental health benefits only work if employees feel comfortable using them.**

Best practices:

- Introduce resources as part of everyday conversations —not just during crises
- Emphasize how easy it is to access care
- Use relatable, non-clinical language
- Reinforce confidentiality

Example:

“If it would help to talk to someone, there are options that make it easy to get support quickly—and it’s all confidential.”

# Building a supportive culture



**One conversation helps. Consistency changes outcomes.**

What effective organizations do:

🗨️ Leaders model openness and normalize mental health

🗨️ Managers are equipped with ongoing tools and training

🧠 Mental health is part of regular communication—not a one-time campaign

🤝 Support shows up across the employee lifecycle

This isn't owned by HR alone—it's a shared responsibility across leadership.

# How managers can take the next step

Managers don't need to be experts—but they do need support.

## To learn more:



Use internal HR resources and communication toolkits

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Familiarize yourself with available mental health benefits like Two Chairs

## To connect employees to care:

Encourage employees to explore in-network mental health support options available through your plan.

Behavioral health partners like Two Chairs offer structured, evidence-based care designed to make it easier for employees to get matched with the right provider and start care quickly.

Two Chairs partners with health plans to help members access high-quality, in-network behavioral health care.



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