LAYLA

Supporting Teams Through Mental Health Challenges

A practical guide for managers

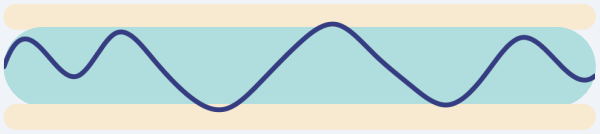
Managers are often asked to hold employees to a high standard and to be someone they feel safe to confide in when they're struggling. This guide is a supportive resource for when you need to do both, and how to know where your role ends.

Work is commonly a source of stress, and it's often where mental health struggles become visible. Mental health, like physical health, exists on a continuum. We each have a different window of tolerance and a different capacity to absorb stress, which can affect our ability to function and can affect our work.

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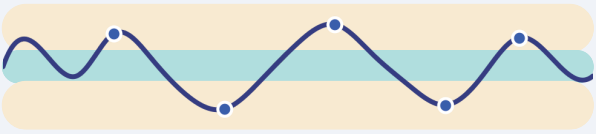
- Canadians miss work every week due to mental illness [4]
- Co-worker and manager support have the strongest positive impact on employee mental wellbeing. [5]
- Reduced productivity is less common among employees whose companies prioritise burnout prevention. [5]

A wider window



Window of tolerance · Over-activated, or shut down

A narrower window, the same stressors



Lands outside the window

The line is identical in both — same week, same pressures. What differs is how much a person can hold.

Dynamics that often go unnoticed at work

- Interpersonal dynamics
- Perfectionism, or pressure on performance
- Lack of control over workload and job demands, which contributes to burnout

Each person is carrying a different load. The same pressure lands very differently from one to the next.



Things you might notice at work

There isn't always an obvious sign that someone is struggling, but some patterns tend to show up over time. Your role is to notice and ask, not to interpret. These could look like:

- Performance: reduced reliability, or a drop in quality of work
- Engagement: less involved in day-to-day connection or discussion
- Attendance: more frequent absences or late arrivals
- Demeanour: seems more tired, less engaged in conversations, or has more frequent emotional reactions

Building Trust Before It's Needed

If your team doesn't feel comfortable with you, they probably won't open up about mental health struggles.

Build in rituals that normalize checking in

Try: Recurring 1:1s, weekly or biweekly, even a 15-minute huddle to lower the barrier to bringing something up.

Try: Keep 1:1s from becoming task lists and leave space for how they're feeling and their goals.

Ask open questions

Try: "How are you managing with everything on your plate?" This opens up the conversation, allowing someone to honestly reflect about something specific.

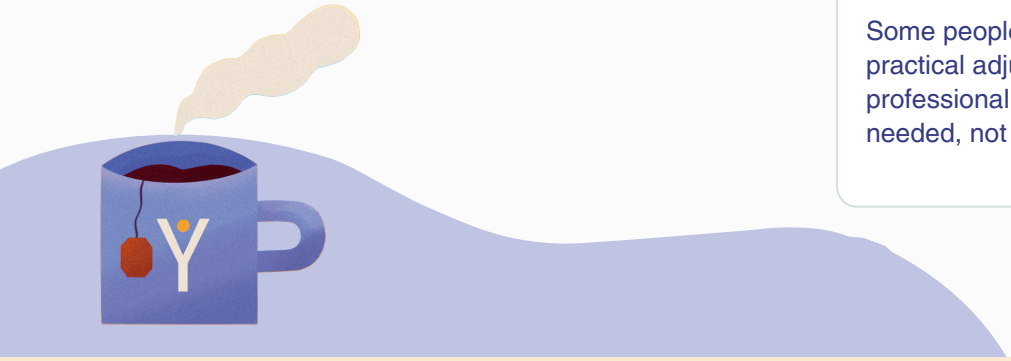
Avoid: "Is everything going well?" This makes it easy to deflect and doesn't invite detail.

Meet challenges with curiosity, not punishment

When something goes wrong, lead with questions rather than consequences.

If an employee's project is running long try:
"I wanted to check in on how things are going with X." Then explore what supports could help.

Avoid: "You didn't get X project to me yet, what's going on?" This invites an excuse instead of the real barrier.



Responding to Mental Health Conversations



Use open body language to invite discussion

Try: Unclench your jaw, drop your shoulders, maintain a relaxed demanour, nod, and keep natural eye contact with normal breaks.

Avoid: Looking down or away, crossing your arms, or a fixed, intense gaze.

Notice your own responses

When you're anxious or reactive, it's harder to create calm for someone else. Take a few deep breaths or a short walk before your meeting.

Ground yourself first

Assuming you know what they need, or jumping to solutions can shut the conversation down.

Try: "Thank you for trusting me with this." / "What would be helpful from me or [company] right now?"

Avoid: False reassurance ("It'll be fine," "Many people go through this"). Even when well intended, it can minimize their experience.

Respond to what they actually need

Some people want acknowledgement, some want practical adjustment, and some could benefit from professional support. Your job is to work out which is needed, not to be all three.

What Comes Next

If an employee says they're feeling a lot of anxiety about the demands of their workload, you don't need to jump right to finding clinical services for anxiety.

Focus on the stressors of the workload: what can be managed differently, deprioritized, or shifted?

Remote and hybrid teams

Signs are harder to see on screen, so lean on **structured check-ins and open questions.**

Agree on support, then close with clarity

Support might be a regular check-in, time off arranged through HR, an adjusted management approach, or workload changes. Be specific about next steps.

Try: "I'm waiting to hear back from HR about the accommodations we discussed, but I'll get back to you by Friday."

Avoid: "I'll follow up when I know more."

A final note

You're not expected to have all the answers or get every conversation right. Connect with other managers, ask HR for resources, and ask for help when you need it.



For Harder Moments

Supporting someone doesn't mean removing expectations. Be clear on what's expected, flexible on how, and involve HR for formal accommodations.

When they don't want to talk

Respect it. Try: "The offer stands whenever it's useful." Keep regular 1:1s going.

When you're part of the stressor

If workload, pace, or your management style is contributing, you may only hear about it indirectly.

If this happens try: Opening the door yourself. Say it plainly: "I want to check whether anything about how I'm managing, or the pace we've been keeping, is making things harder. I'd genuinely rather know."

Offer another route. Some people won't feel comfortable raising this with you directly, and that's okay. Remind them they can go to People Ops or a skip level manager.

Know when to escalate

If an employee shares something beyond the scope of what you can support with (i.e. workplace abuse, suicidal thoughts), escalate to the right mental health supports: loop in HR and access crisis resources.

Resources, including 9-8-8, are listed on page 4.

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Helpful Resources for Managers

You don't need to have the right answer yourself — pointing someone to the right resource is enough.

- The National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace — guidance on building a workplace mental health strategy
- *Workplace Strategies for Mental Health* — short articles and learning resources for both employees and managers on a range of mental health topics
- *Mental Health First Aid:* An evidence-based skills training for responding to mental health concerns
- *Mental health training for leaders* — CAMH's workplace education and consulting services
- Trauma-informed leadership (Wilfrid Laurier University)

About this guide

This guide is general information for people managers. It is not clinical advice, it does not support diagnosis, and it is not a substitute for professional care. Managers are not expected to assess or treat mental health conditions, the aim is to notice changes, open a conversation, and connect people to appropriate support.

Guidance on accommodation, leave, and confidentiality varies by province and by employer policy. Please confirm these details with HR or legal counsel before proceeding with any advice provided in this guide.

If someone is in crisis

Contact local emergency services, or 9-8-8, Canada's Suicide Crisis Helpline — available by call or text, 24 hours a day, in English and French.

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Guiding mental health journeys with care

Layla is a Canadian mental health service that connects individuals with thoughtfully selected qualified therapists — online and in-person — based on their unique needs, goals, and preferences. Therapy through Layla is currently offered in Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia and Nova Scotia.

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