

WHAT YOU CAN DO AND SAY

Practical words and actions when a colleague may be struggling

A fuller Space to Breathe Therapy workplace resource

People often avoid mental-health conversations because they fear saying the wrong thing. Helpful support is usually simpler than that. Notice a change, ask gently, listen, take the person seriously, respect your limits and help them find the next appropriate step.

What supportive mental-health first aid at work means

Mental-health first aid at work is about responding early and humanely when somebody may be struggling. It is not about diagnosing a condition or becoming the person's therapist. The most useful role is often to notice, open a conversation, listen, support practical next steps and help the person reach appropriate professional or workplace help.

Core actions

- Choose a private, calm place where possible.
- Start with what you have noticed rather than a diagnosis.
- Ask one open question and give the person time to answer.
- Listen without immediately trying to fix or compare.
- Ask what would be useful instead of assuming.
- Agree what happens next and when you will check in.

What can make the difference

People often remember less about the exact wording and more about whether they felt rushed, judged, believed, embarrassed or supported. A calm tone, genuine attention and clear follow-up can reduce the fear of speaking again.

A simple reminder

Be present. Listen with care. Offer practical support. Know when to guide toward professional help. Follow up.

Recognising changes without diagnosing

There is no single behaviour that proves somebody has a mental-health problem. Look for changes from the person's usual pattern, consider context and avoid making assumptions.

Changes you might notice

- becoming quieter, more withdrawn or less socially connected
- difficulty concentrating, remembering instructions or making decisions
- uncharacteristic lateness, absence or staying at work far beyond normal hours
- appearing tense, tearful, flat, unusually irritable or overwhelmed
- more mistakes, repeated checking or loss of confidence
- struggling with change, competing priorities or sensory/social demands
- working hard to appear fine while becoming increasingly exhausted

What these signs do - and do not - tell you

A change can have many causes: physical illness, grief, caring responsibilities, conflict, poor sleep, financial stress, neurodivergent burnout, work pressure or a mental-health condition. The purpose of noticing is not to decide which explanation is correct. It is to create a respectful opportunity for the person to say what they need.

What to avoid

- diagnosing a colleague from behaviour
- demanding personal details before offering support
- saying 'everyone feels like that' or comparing experiences
- assuming high performance means the person is coping well
- discussing concerns casually with other colleagues
- waiting for a crisis before checking in

A good opening

'I have noticed you seem under more pressure than usual. I may be wrong, but I wanted to check how things are for you.'

What you can do and say

The aim is not to produce the perfect sentence. It is to make the conversation safer, slower and more useful.

Helpful wording

- 'I am here to listen if you want to talk.'
- 'I have noticed you seem under a lot of pressure. How are things?'
- 'That sounds really difficult. Thank you for telling me.'
- 'What would feel most useful from me right now?'
- 'Would you like help finding the right support?'

Listening that actually helps

- ask one question at a time
- allow silence and processing time
- reflect back what you have understood
- ask whether the person wants listening, practical help or signposting
- avoid immediately looking for a positive spin
- notice whether the conversation is becoming too intense and offer a pause
- check what the person wants recorded or passed on within workplace boundaries

If the person says 'I am fine'

Do not force disclosure. You can leave the door open: 'That is okay. I just wanted you to know I am available, and I can also point you toward support if you ever want it.' If you are a manager and there are work-performance or safety concerns, those may still need a separate clear workplace conversation.

Neurodivergent communication

Some people may need longer to answer, may prefer written communication, may find eye contact uncomfortable or may appear emotionally flat while experiencing intense distress. Direct, concrete questions and written next steps can improve accessibility.

Ask, do not assume

'Would you prefer to talk now, write things down, or come back to this at another time?'

Support, boundaries and confidentiality

Caring support is strongest when roles are clear. A colleague or manager can listen, help with practical work issues and signpost without becoming permanently available or responsible for treatment.

Workplace support might include

- a temporary change to workload or priorities
- clearer written instructions or deadlines
- protected breaks or reduced interruptions
- time for health appointments
- a quieter environment or different communication route
- regular but time-limited check-ins
- occupational-health input or a phased return after absence

Confidentiality

Treat personal information carefully and share only for a legitimate reason. Do not promise absolute secrecy. If there is a serious and immediate safety concern, safeguarding need or emergency, information may need to be shared with the appropriate person or service. Explain the limit clearly rather than surprising the person later.

Looking after yourself as the supporter

- know when you have reached the limit of your role
- use appropriate supervision or managerial support
- do not become the only person the colleague can contact
- take breaks after emotionally demanding conversations
- notice if you are carrying the situation home
- seek your own support if the conversation has affected you

Support is not unlimited availability

Kindness and boundaries can exist together. Clear limits make support safer and more sustainable.

When work itself is part of the problem

Mental-health support should not become a way of placing the whole burden on the individual. Work itself can create or worsen distress. A supportive response asks not only 'How can this person cope?' but also 'What in the job or environment needs attention?'

Six areas worth reviewing

- **Demands:** workload, deadlines, work patterns and environment.
- **Control:** how much say someone has over how they complete their work.
- **Support:** resources, encouragement, training and practical help.
- **Relationships:** conflict, exclusion, bullying, poor communication or isolation.
- **Role:** whether expectations and responsibilities are clear and compatible.
- **Change:** how organisational change is explained, managed and reviewed.

Questions managers can ask

- Which parts of work are currently creating the most pressure?
- What can be paused, reduced or clarified?
- Is the person receiving conflicting instructions?
- Would a reasonable adjustment remove a barrier?
- Is a relationship or team-culture issue contributing?
- What action will we own as an organisation rather than asking the individual to absorb?

Reasonable adjustments

Where disability is relevant, employers may need to consider reasonable adjustments. Helpful adjustments are individual: they respond to how a person's condition affects work rather than relying on assumptions about a diagnosis.

Support + prevention

A healthy workplace responds compassionately when somebody struggles and also acts on avoidable causes of work-related stress.

Urgent concerns, follow-up and action planning

If somebody says they cannot keep themselves safe, talks about suicide, or you believe there may be immediate danger, take it seriously. Stay calm, remain with the person where appropriate and use the relevant urgent or emergency route.

A simple urgent-response sequence

- listen and acknowledge what the person has said
- ask clearly enough to understand whether there is immediate danger
- follow your organisation's emergency or safeguarding procedure
- help the person access urgent professional support
- call 999 in an immediate life-threatening emergency
- record only the necessary workplace facts and protect privacy

Follow-up after any significant conversation

A supportive first conversation can be undermined if nothing happens afterwards. Agree what action belongs to whom, what information can be shared, when the next check-in will happen and what will trigger escalation.

Action tracker

Action	Owner	By when	Review / outcome
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Reflection prompts

- What makes me rush into advice?
- How can I leave more room for the person's own words?
- What support route could I offer without taking over?
- What boundary do I need to keep so I can support safely?

The point of follow-up

People should not have to retell a difficult story repeatedly because workplace actions were never recorded or completed.

Reflection workbook and message

For the supporter

What did I notice?

What did the person actually tell me?

What did they ask for?

What is within my role?

What needs another professional or workplace route?

For the workplace

What practical work factor needs attention?

What has been agreed?

Who owns the action?

What is the review date?

How will we know whether the change has helped?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

You do not need to fix another human being.

Sometimes the fear of saying the wrong thing stops us saying anything at all. Support can begin much more simply: noticing, asking, listening and staying respectful.

A person who is struggling may not need advice in the first moment. They may need to know that somebody has noticed without judging them, that they are allowed to speak honestly and that there is a route toward practical or professional help.

Workplaces also need to look beyond the individual. If workload, unclear roles, conflict, exclusion, poor boundaries or badly managed change are contributing to distress, wellbeing support should sit alongside action on those conditions.

Small conversations matter - and so does what happens afterwards.

UK support and further guidance

- Health and Safety Executive (HSE): work-related stress and Management Standards.
- ACAS: workplace mental health, reasonable adjustments and workplace concerns.
- NHS 111: urgent health advice; 999 for an immediate life-threatening emergency.
- Mental Health First Aid England: accredited training and MHFA resources.
- Occupational health, EAP or workplace wellbeing services where available.

Important note

This Space to Breathe Therapy resource is educational guidance. It is not an accredited Mental Health First Aid England training manual, does not confer an MHFA qualification, and does not replace medical, emergency, safeguarding, occupational-health, HR or legal advice.