



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Mental health for all

How to Tell if Someone is Struggling with their Mental Health

Like our physical health, mental health is a key part of our overall well-being. When our mental health is good, we have confidence in our skills and abilities, can manage life's ups and downs, and find meaning and purpose in the things we do.¹ About 1 in 5 of us will experience mental illness, but we all have mental health and need to take care of it.^{2,3}

Knowing what to look for and how to support someone who is struggling with their mental health is an important skill for everyone in the workplace. It can help prevent and ease problems and contributes to a work culture that fosters psychological support and safety.

How can you tell if someone is struggling with their mental health?

You don't need to be a healthcare professional to tune into signs that a co-worker might be struggling with their mental health. Below are some changes you might notice in the workplace:



1. Social behaviours

When someone is struggling with their mental health, they may become less socially interactive. Maybe you're having trouble engaging them in social conversation, or they're skipping team coffee breaks. Or maybe they're communicating less frequently with you.



2. Productivity

When our mental health isn't good, our ability to perform well at work is often affected. This could mean missing deadlines, making more errors than usual, or having difficulty keeping track of multiple tasks. When someone is struggling with their mental health, you may notice other examples of changes in either the quantity or quality of their work.





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3. Flexibility

When we are having problems with our mental health, we might rely on our internal “autopilot” to keep functioning at work. While this can be helpful to get us through a difficult period, it could also mean we are less able to be flexible in the way we work. If a co-worker is having difficulty adapting to small, day-to-day changes in workflow, schedule, or process, it may be a sign their autopilot has taken over and they could use a trusted co-pilot.



4. Expression

When we are experiencing problems with our mental health, our perception of the world around us may be coloured in a negative way. As a result, a co-worker might express more negativity, frustration, or cynicism than usual. They might be more critical of their own work or someone else’s, or even express feelings of sadness, loneliness, or hopelessness. When a co-worker expresses negativity or difficult feelings, it might be their way of asking for help.



5. Engagement

When our mind is occupied with other stressful things, it’s easy to lose sight of the reasons we do the work we do. Similarly, when someone is struggling with their mental health, they may appear disengaged or less interested in aspects of their work that they previously enjoyed.

Tip: Keep in mind, you might notice these changes in a co-worker for many different reasons—and not necessarily because they are struggling with their mental health.





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How you can support someone who is struggling with their mental health:



1. Talk to them

Don't be afraid to talk to someone who appears to be struggling. The best thing you can do is simply tell them what you've noticed and ask if they are doing okay.

Tip: Try not to make assumptions about what they're experiencing or why. Many different circumstances can adversely affect our mental health—some you might know about, others you might not.



2. Listen openly

If your co-worker feels comfortable talking about what's affecting their mental health, they may describe their concerns in more detail to you.

Tip: Instead of listening in order to solve their problem, simply listen to try to understand what they're experiencing. Listen "actively" by asking open-ended questions, encouraging them to continue talking, and avoiding distractions like your phone or email while they are speaking.



3. Express your support

Regardless of what they're experiencing, express your support to them and thank them for sharing with you.

Tip: Avoid giving advice or sharing similar experiences you've had (unless they ask). Tell them that you want to help and that you're concerned about them.



4. Encourage help

It's not your job to be a counsellor, therapist, or anything other than a supportive colleague. Wrap up your conversation by encouraging them to seek help for the problems they are facing.

Tip: You might suggest that they talk to a supervisor, or to human resources, or that they access the employee assistance program (EAP) if your organization provides one. You could also encourage them to connect with supportive friends or a spouse or partner, or to contact a health professional if they feel their concerns are affecting their day-to-day functioning.





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Many EAPs offer supportive services to address all types of life challenges including relationships, finances, work stress, and mental health issues.

Knowing what to look for and how to support someone who is struggling with their mental health is an important skill for everyone in the workplace.

Additional Resources:

- Mental Health Meter – Take stock of your mental health in 2 minutes
- Every Mind Matters – Possible causes of poor mental health (UK)
- BeThere.org – 5 golden rules for supporting someone with a mental illness
- When You're Worried About a Colleague's Mental Health – Harvard Business Review

References:

- 1 Canadian Mental Health Association. (2016). *Mental health for life*. <https://cmha.ca/documents/mental-health-for-life>
- 2 Canadian Mental Health Association. (2016). *Mental illnesses in the workplace*. <https://cmha.ca/documents/mental-illnesses-in-the-workplace>
- 3 Mental Health Commission of Canada (2013). *Making the case for investing in mental health in Canada*.

