# Starting the Conversation: Shoulder to Shoulder

This tip sheet aims to help PSP feel more confident in starting supportive, stigma-free mental health conversations.

Tip Sheet | PSP | Mental Health | Supportive Conversations

5 - 7 min read

## Introduction

Building strong connections at work is essential for fostering a healthy environment. Initiating conversations about mental health not only helps us recognize potential warning signs early, but also promotes overall wellbeing and supports everyone in performing at their best.

## When to Use

- During briefings, huddles, or team meetings to set expectations for voluntary check-ins.
- When a coworker seems "in the orange" (showing more noticeable changes such as increased irritability, withdrawal, or difficulty concentrating..
- As a quick reference after a tough call or during periods of sustained operational stress.
- To plan supportive actions for a colleague returning from mental-health-related leave.

## Who It's For

This tip sheet is intended for all public safety personnel (PSP).

## Disclaimer

This tip sheet is not intended to replace your organization's peer support program or professional counselling.

## Key Message

Remember: You do not need to have the right answers. Listening without judgement, showing genuine care, and helping someone connect with appropriate support can make a meaningful difference.

PSHSA.ca Public Services Health & Safety Association

HWCTLAEN0826

# Be Proactive: Build a Supportive Environment

Mental health support shouldn't be reserved for "bad days." It should be woven into the fabric of the workplace in ways that respect individual boundaries and readiness:

**Normalize the "Check-In"**

- Make wellness a regular optional topic during morning briefings, meetings, or shared breaks.

**The "Shoulder-to-Shoulder" Approach**

- Conversations often feel less intense when you are doing something else - walking to a meeting, grabbing lunch, playing a sport, or working on a shared project. “Side-by-side" interaction often lowers the pressure and gives people more control over how much they share.

**Be an Example (without oversharing)**

- Share brief, work-appropriate stress-management strategies.

# Start the Conversation

If you notice a colleague seems **"in the orange"** (unusually irritable, withdrawn, or struggling to focus), a simple outreach can make a world of difference. Think about the below both before you start a conversation and during the conversation:



## Assess your capacity

- Make sure you have the time and energy to listen
- If you’re overwhelmed, it’s okay to wait or refer.



## Find a neutral space

- Pick somewhere private enough for them to feel comfortable
- Or connect over an activity - lunch, a walk, or coffee.



## Listen without fixing

- You don't need to solve the problem or fix it.
- Listen, validate, and help them find resources.



## Focus on observations

- Name behaviour, not a diagnosis or interpretation.
- Try saying: “You've had some tough calls — how are you?”

## Coworker Support Framework (4 Steps)

| Step | Actions You Can Take | Example Language |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Ask | • Use "I noticed" statements to keep the conversation objective. | "I noticed you've been a bit more stressed than usual this week. How are you holding up?" |
| 2. Listen | • Focus on understanding their perspective without judging. | "That sounds like a lot to carry. I'm here to listen—take your time, no rush." |
| 3. Act | • Collaborate on small, helpful steps. Avoid giving unsolicited advice. | "What would be most helpful for you right now? We could grab a coffee, or I can help you find support." |
| 4. Follow up | • Check in a few days later. It shows your care was genuine. | "Just checking back in to see how you're feeling today. No pressure to talk, just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you." |

## Supporting a Coworker's Return after Mental Health Absence

Returning to work after a mental health-related leave can bring mixed emotions, including stress, relief and vulnerability.

- Keep it Professional and Kind: A simple, "It's great to see you" is often enough.
- Protect Privacy: Avoid questions about the reason for the leave or recovery details.
- Focus on Practical Support: Help them catch up on updates, changes, or procedures.
- Foster Inclusion Without Pressure: Include them in team and social events while respecting their pace and boundaries.

**What to Avoid**

- ✕ Asking for personal details about the leave
- ✕ Making assumptions about recovery
- ✕ Overloading them with work or updates
- ✕ Repeatedly bringing up their absence

# Quick Tips for Mutual Support:

**Know your resources**

- Know peer support and employee & family assistance programs.
- Keep trusted community and crisis services close at hand.

**Validate without minimizing**

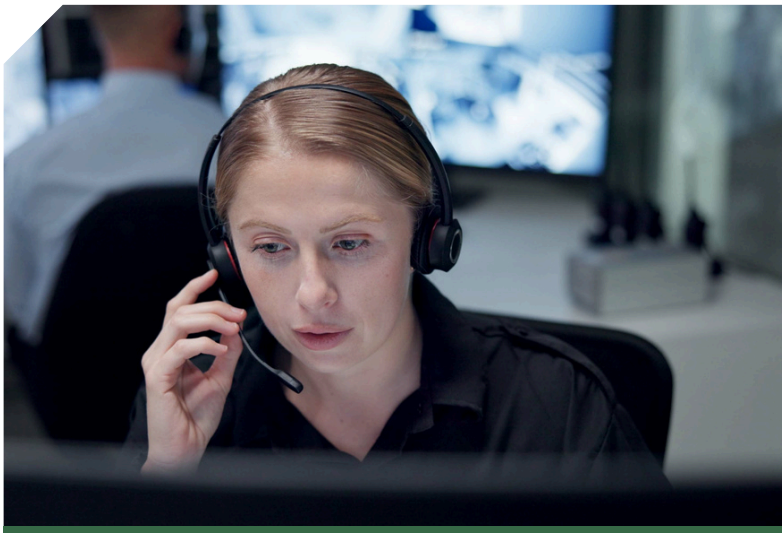
- Acknowledge the impact without comparing it to anyone else's.
- "Given all that, it makes sense you'd feel this way."

**Ask, then listen**

- Ask open questions about pressure, not personal shortcomings.
- "What's been the heaviest thing on your plate lately?"

**Know the threshold for action**

- Self-harm, hopelessness, or being unsafe to work needs action.
- Follow emergency protocols or call a crisis line now.



**If you or someone you know is in crisis**

**9-1-1**
Immediate Emergencies

**9-8-8**
Suicide Crisis Helpline (24/7)

**1-866-531-2600**
ConnexOntario (mental health and additions)

**1-833-677-2668**
Peer Support: Boots on the Ground



# References


- BC First Responders Mental Health. (n.d.). Overview: Peer support programs. BC First Responders Mental Health. https://bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/resource/overview-peer-support-programs/
- Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia. (2024). First responders toolkit: Get the conversation started. https://www.firstrespondersmentalhealthns.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/WCBN-6942-02-First-Responders-Toolkit-Get-the-Conversation-Started_8.5x11_Digital-1.pdf