Starting the Conversation for Leaders

This tip sheet is intended for leaders, supervisors, managers, and command staff in Public Safety organizations.

Tip Sheet | PSP Leaders | Mental Health | Supportive Conversations | 5 - 7 min read

Introduction

Leaders play a critical role in shaping psychologically healthy workplaces. How leaders talk about mental health (and how they respond when concerns arise) sets the tone for trust, safety, and performance.

Initiating conversations about mental health helps leaders identify potential concerns early, reduce stigma, and foster environments where people can perform effectively over time and recover sustainably.

When to Use

- Checking in proactively during one-on-ones, shift briefings, or meetings
- Noticing changes in behaviour or performance, such as increased irritability, withdrawal, or reduced focus
- Preparing to initiate a supportive conversation
- Navigating boundaries between leadership responsibilities and mental health support
- Supporting an employee's return to work
- Uncertain about next steps, available resources, or when consultations or escalation is required

Who It's For

Leaders, supervisors, managers, and command staff in Public Safety organizations.

Disclaimer

This tip sheet is intended as a practical, day-to-day leadership resource to support PSP before concerns escalate into crises, and is not intended to replace peer support programs or professional mental health services.

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.

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This resource was informed by SAMHA Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed and the Trauma and Recovery Lab Trauma-informed leadership for public safety personnel [Online training module].

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Be Trauma Informed

People experience stress and trauma in different ways. Trauma-informed care (TIC) is a strength-based leadership approach that recognizes that many individuals have experienced trauma in their lives and that these experiences may influence how they think, feel, and respond at work and in the community (SAMHSA, 2014).

A trauma-informed approach does not require leaders to disclose or seek personal histories. Instead, it focuses on how systems, interactions and decisions affect psychological safety and functioning.

A TIC approach considers the impact of trauma on employees, clients, organizations, and the public. The following principles demonstrate how you can implement TIC in your workplace

Safety
Creating physically and psychologically safe environments through clear policies, predictable processes, and supportive workplaces.

Trustworthiness and Transparency
Building trust through consistent actions, open communication, and fair, equitable practices.

Peer Support
Encouraging supportive connections among colleagues to foster understanding, shared learning, and resilience.

Collaboration and Mutuality
Promoting teamwork and shared decision-making, recognizing that everyone has a role in creating inclusive and supportive environments.

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
Recognizing individual strengths, respecting autonomy, and providing opportunities for growth and participation.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Awareness
Acknowledging systemic inequities and supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion across all areas of work.

Challenge the Trauma Hierarchy

Trauma-informed leaders actively challenge the **trauma hierarchy** - an informal and often unspoken practice of ranking experiences as more or less traumatic, basing their assumptions on the event itself, or what role an individual played in it.

For example, direct involvement in a critical incident may be viewed as more serious than arriving afterward, or one major event may be seen as more legitimate than the cumulative impact of repeated smaller stressors over time.

Challenging the trauma hierarchy supports psychological safety and helps create environments where all forms of distress are recognized as valid and deserving of attention, regardless of role, exposure level, or timing.



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You Can Challenge the Trauma Hierarchy by. . .

Validating, Not Ranking

- Avoid comparing incidents or determining whose experience is worse.
- Focus on impacts, needs, and available supports.

Recognizing Cumulative Exposure

- Repeated stressors and near-misses can build over time, and can cause equal psychological harm.
- Cumulative exposure may affect wellbeing, performance, and health.

Using Inclusive Language

- Normalize a wide range of stress and trauma responses. Avoid stigmatizing or judgmental language.
- Reinforce support as appropriate before, during, or after challenges.

Encouraging Early Support-Seeking

- Seeking support reflects awareness, and responsibility.
- Early action can prevent concerns from escalating.

Modelling psychological safety - Be the Leader You Need

How leaders talk about mental health sets expectations for the team. Consistent, respectful responses reduce stigma and promote trust.



Image Credit: Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources

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Be Proactive: Build a Psychologically Safe Culture

Psychological safety can't be something teams reach for only when a crisis makes it visible. It has to be the default, everyday condition and expectation. Leaders create the conditions where support doesn't require proof of severity to be offered. That starts with small, consistent, unglamorous practices.

Normalize wellbeing check-ins	Integrate brief wellness moments into team meetings, shift briefings, or one-on-ones (e.g., "Before we start, how's everyone holding up this week?"). Participation should be voluntary and non-evaluative.
Set the tone from the top	Leaders don't need to overshare, but acknowledging stressors (e.g., workload, operational demands) signals that wellbeing is a legitimate workplace priority.
Model healthy leadership behaviours	Demonstrate respectful boundaries, recovery after difficult operations, and appropriate use of available supports. What leaders model becomes cultural permission for the rest of the organization.

Signs it's Working

- Team members raise concerns without prompting
- Workload conversations happen before burnout hits
- People use their time off without guilt or apology
- Check-ins feel routine, not like a warning sign

Mental health leadership should be proactive - not limited to crisis situations or critical incidents

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Starting the Conversation

When a team member appears to be struggling, i.e. you notice increased irritability, withdrawal, decreased focus etc., early leadership engagement matters.

Before You Start

1

Assess your role and capacity

- Make sure you are the right person to initiate this — and that you have the time and energy to truly listen.

2

Choose the right setting

- Pick a private, neutral space that feels supportive — not disciplinary or evaluative.

During the Conversation

3

Focus on observations

- Use objective, behaviour-focused language. Not interpretations or diagnoses.

4

Listen without fixing

- Your role is not to counsel. It is to listen, validate, and guide toward the right supports.

5

Respect autonomy

- If they choose not to talk, acknowledge that choice and leave the door open.

6

Be clear about next steps

- Close the loop. Name what happens next, and who else can help.

CONNECT THEM TO SUPPORT

Leaders can connecting team members to formal resources when concerns arise.
→ Employee & Family Assistance Program
→ Peer support and critical incident supports
→ Occupational health, HR, or benefits provider
→ Crisis line, if there is any risk of harm
→ Staff psychologists (if applicable)

WHAT NOT TO SAY

✕ “I know exactly how you feel.” — it centres you, not them.
✕ “You seem depressed.” — that is a diagnosis, not an observation.
✕ “Try not to dwell on it.” — it dismisses what they carry.
✕ “Everyone deals with this.” — comparison shuts the door.

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Leadership Support Framework (4 Steps)

Engaging in mental health conversations doesn't require expertise — it requires presence. Four simple steps guide the process: ask directly and without judgment, listen without rushing to fix, act by connecting people to appropriate support, and follow up to show the conversation mattered beyond the moment it happened.

Step	Leader Action	Example Language
1. Ask	• Raise concerns using observable behaviours, not assumptions	"I've noticed your workload is pretty heavy these days, and I wanted to check in."
2. Listen	• Create space for the employee's perspective without judgment. Listen to understand.	"Thank you for sharing. I appreciate you being open."
3. Act	• Identify reasonable supports and next steps within your role	"Let's talk about what would be helpful right now and what resources are available."
4. Follow up	• Check in to demonstrate continued accountability and care	"I wanted to follow up and see how things are going since we last spoke."

Supporting a Worker's Return after Mental Health Absence

Returning after a mental health-related absence can be challenging for anyone. Leadership behaviour during this transition can significantly influence recovery and retention. Effective leadership support during the return-to-work process includes:

- Professional, Respectful Re-Entry: Acknowledge their return without requesting personal details (e.g., "Welcome back - we're glad to have you.").
- Focus on Role Clarity and Expectations: Discuss work demands, accommodations (if applicable), and any operational updates.
- Promote Inclusion while Respecting Boundaries: Ensure individuals remain connected to the team, while respecting their readiness, boundaries, and pace.

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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

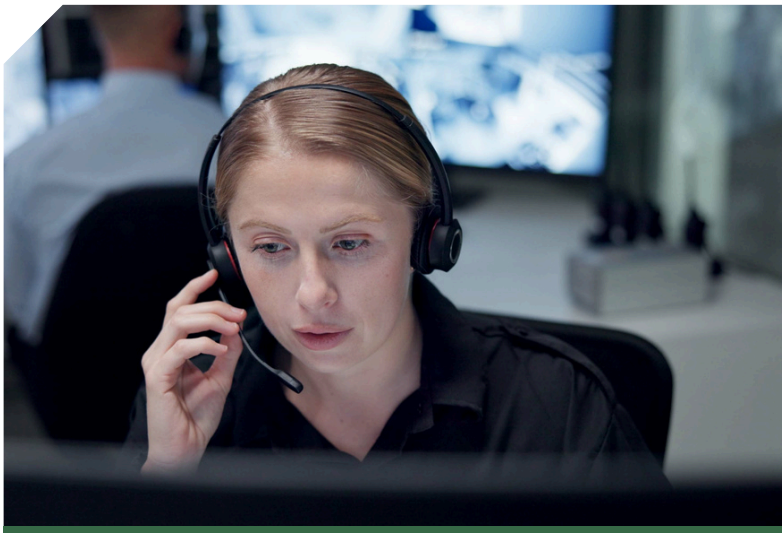
- Acknowledge the impact without comparing it to anyone else's.
- "Given all that, it makes sense you'd feel this way."

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



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