

Module 5

Worried about a colleague? A how-to guide on checking in with your co-workers.

"Hi, I'm Vanesssa Rohlf - I'm a consultant, therapist, and educator specialising in stress management, compassion fatigue, pet loss, and animal bereavement for animal caregivers. I've teamed up with Flynn's Walk to provide you with some short and easy to digest "well-being tips" because we all need a bit of support from time to time....

Have you noticed a co-worker is not quite themselves? Have you noticed changes in their behaviour, attitude or mood? Maybe you've noticed they've become more withdrawn, or they appear quite down or uncharacteristically irritable. Maybe you've noticed they are engaging in some pretty risky behaviour which is really not like them.

If you have, you want to find a time to check in with them to see if they are ok,\.

But maybe you've already thought about that but the idea of it might be a little daunting and you might wonder where do I even begin? Or what if I say the wrong thing.

In this module, I'm going to walk you through how to have a conversation and check-in with a colleague you might be concerned about.

In this chat, we will be talking about suicide, so it may be a little triggering or upsetting for some people. If this discussion is distressing to you in any way, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14. For those listening outside of Australia please call your local crisis support line.

The suggestions I provide here follow guidelines set out by RUOK. RUOK is a suicide prevention charity in Australia, that encourages us to notice the signs of mental health difficulties and follow up by checking in with our friends, family, or colleagues or whoever we may be concerned about.

So, let's jump into a little guide for checking in if you're worried about a coworker.

The very first thing you can do is ask yourself **if you're ready**, before you even start to have a conversation. Ask yourself four things.

- 1. Are you feeling ok yourself? If you've just done a 12-hour shift and you're exhausted then this may not be the best time for you to be checking in on someone. Best to do it when you're on your game and feeling good.
- 2. Do you have time for a chat? Got a lot of surgeries booked and only ten minutes downtime then best leave it for when you both have the time for a chat.
- 3. Are there other people around that might overhear the conversation – if so, then maybe your colleague might not want to open up? You're better off speaking in a private place that is free of interruptions that might even mean going for a walk somewhere about from the clinic
- 4. Importantly, are you prepared for them to say they aren't doing well?

This guide will help you prepare but I also encourage you to also be prepared by knowing who and where you can refer your co-worker to, should they tell you that they are struggling.

That might include learning more about the mental health resources that are available online as well as having the details of your EAP provider handy, if you have one, and the details of crisis support services.

So, if you're feeling ok, you have time, the opportunity and are prepared for them to say they aren't ok then you can go ahead and **Ask**

You can begin the conversation by noting some of the changes you have noticed, you could say something like: "hey I noticed you're not quite yourself lately, are you ok?"

The NEXT thing you want to do is listen. And listen in a non-judgemental way:

This means: Avoids saying things like "Well it could be worse, look on the bright side, or harden up.

These comments may be well intended but they can sometimes come across as minimising the person's experience and can sometimes shut down the conversation.

I understand it's hard to see and hear someone upset and we might be tempted to fix it but sometimes all people might need is a little space to talk things through and feel understood and heard.

With this in mind, also try to avoid telling them exactly what their problem is and how they should fix it. You may well be right but what we want to do right now is just sit and listen.

It's amazing how the simple act of listening without any judgement can help someone who may be struggling feel a little better.

You can show you're listening by:

Giving them your undivided attention, this means not getting distracted by things like your phone and not interrupting them when they are speaking and facing the person directly. You don't have to get in their face of course but if culturally appropriate direct eye contact can also be another way of showing you're listening.

Other ways you can listen are by:

Doing things like Nodding or saying things like uh uh... or ok...yes.

You can encourage people to talk a little more by asking what we call open questions.

These are questions which do not just have a yes or no answer - like "what do you think led to you feeling this way"

Just don't fire off one question after another so they don't feel like they are being interrogated. We just want to be curious and interested about what's going on for them to show we care.

Now you can level up on your listening skills by reflecting what you're hearing back to them.

You can do this by paraphrasing or finding meaning in what they are saying.

For example: they may say "I don't know what to do, I've tried so many things and nothing works! I'm so sick of it.

Perhaps in that statement you could hear that there was an angry undertone to it, you can kind of reflect that back to them and say “Sounds like you’re feeling a bit frustrated and may a little fed up”

This is such a good skill because you are able to check that you’ve understood what they are saying, it communicates to your co-worker that you’re listening, and this also helps the person check if that’s really what they meant and, if it's not then they have the opportunity to clarify things.

Ok, so you’ve asked, you’ve listened, and then what you want to **encourage some action**

You can do this by asking:

What’s helping get you through right now? Or “you know it sounds like you’re really overwhelmed right now and I’m wondering if there’s anything you could do to help ease some of the demands on you right now?”

This is where you can share, where relevant, some of those mental health resources .

Do remember - we don’t expect you to be counsellors. And actually, your co-worker probably doesn’t expect you to be and maybe doesn’t want you to be either. Just be yourself.

So, it’s here that you want to **refer**. Let them know you’re here to chat as a friend and that it can really help to speak to a GP, qualified counsellor or psychologist or other health professional about what’s going on.

Maybe you’ve seen a counsellor when you’ve had a tough time and it helped you. Sharing your story about this experience might help them feel like they aren’t alone and that it provides them with some hope that speaking to someone can really help.

If you’re concerned that your co-worker might be at risk of suicide, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 for crisis support and if life is in danger call 000. These numbers that are provided are for those who live in Australia. If you’re located outside of Australia, please use the relevant crisis support and emergency contacts in your area.

So, you’ve asked how they are, and you’ve encouraged action and referred.

It can then be helpful to check in on your co-worker from time to time. Remember, checking in is not one question, tick the box, and you’re done with this kind of scenario. It’s a process.

Checking in means following up - “hey how did you get on with the appointment you made to see the doc?”

Or hey last time we spoke you weren’t feeling so great, how are you getting on?

LASTLY

It can be really rewarding helping co-workers out who are really struggling. It can also be upsetting to see someone we care about having a hard time. Do try to look after yourself too. Manage your stress levels, and practice good self-care.

Also, if you’re finding things difficult, please also reach out and ask for support. Speak to supportive friends, colleagues, and family and of course you can also reach out for professional support too! Make sure you’re practising what you preach!

So, if you're worried about a colleague, you can check in with your co-worker by

First check in with yourself and make sure you are ready, ask them, are you ok, encourage some actions, follow up with them, and also take care of yourself and practice what you preach.

And, if you'd like more information about how to check in and have discussions about mental health difficulties, you can go to: [RUOK.org.au](https://www.ruok.org.au)

"Thanks for listening. It is our hope that these tips have helped you. Remember, there are other modules available, so do be sure to explore them in your own time... and if you've enjoyed this content, why not share it with a friend or family member!"

That's it from me bye for now.