



# SUPPORTIVE CONVERSATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE FOR MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS

Supervisors, managers, and leaders can support the emotional well-being of their colleagues by inviting regular conversations and check-ins. This guide offers practical tips and suggestions for facilitating well-being discussions and addressing mental health concerns in the workplace or learning environment.

## CHECKING IN AND CREATING THE FOUNDATION FOR A SUPPORTIVE CONVERSATION

Before reaching out to a member of your team and having a conversation, it is important to create the conditions for a supportive conversation.

### Protect safety and establish trust

Consider ways in which the location, timing, privacy (and any limits to privacy/confidentiality), and setting expectations can promote a sense of safety and comfort during the conversation.

### Cultivate non-judgmental curiosity and listen generously

Everyone manages stress differently. Start by asking questions and seeking to understand the other person's experience. Foster open communication by sharing, listening, and being respectful.

### Empathy, kindness, and genuineness

Acknowledge and validate emotions without trying to immediately "fix" things. Respond with empathy, understanding, and compassion when someone shares personal struggles. If someone discloses mental health concerns, normalize and address stigma ("it is okay to seek help").

## PLANNING A CONVERSATION

Before having a conversation with a colleague, it can be helpful to practice phrases that can help support the discussion. You can also reflect on your goals and concerns about the conversation.

### Preparatory Questions for You

- What is the purpose of the conversation?
- What do you hope to accomplish and have as an outcome of the conversation?
- What are your assumptions of how the other person will respond?
- What are your thoughts going into the conversation?
- What are your own reactions, and how might these influence the conversation?

## SETTING A STRUCTURE FOR A CONVERSATION

- Plan an introduction or opening to start off the conversation.

- Specifically state what you are concerned about or want to accomplish.
- Ask the other person for their input.
- State your specific expectations.
- Set a specific “follow-up” meeting date/time.

### Initiating a conversation about a well-being concern: Example opening statements

- “It seems to me you are not yourself lately.
- “Is everything okay?”
- “How can I support you in your job?”
- “Anything you would like to talk about?”
- “It’s always okay to ask for help.”
- “I might not understand exactly what you’re going through, but it appears that something is bothering you.”

### Work-related concerns: Example opening statements

- I have something I’d like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.
- I’d like to talk about something with you, but first I’d like to get your point of view.
- I need your help with what just happened. Let’s arrange some time to talk.
- I think we have different perceptions about this situation; I’d like to hear your thoughts on it.

## SUGGESTING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

In your conversation, you have an opportunity to share available resources with your colleague. Depending on the concern and the impact on the work, it may be helpful to communicate directly about expectations, areas of concern, and possible solutions.

- If the concerns are impacting work performance, review the specific behaviors or work-related issues that you’d like to address.
- As you note observable behaviors that could be challenging for your team member’s work, ask if there is anything that may be helpful to them; for example,

flexibility in tasks or schedules, if appropriate, or other adjustments that may help them complete their essential work.

- Encourage a collaborative approach and generate their input in decision-making.
- Practice understanding and empathy, but communicate expectations and limits. Setting boundaries can be a compassionate act by supporting both the individual and the entire team with clear expectations about work and behavior.
- As needed, you may consider raising the idea that personal difficulties can affect work. Although your team member may not want to disclose personal concerns, you can normalize taking care of one’s mental well-being and accessing resources.
- Share information about resources. Counselors from the [Office of Counseling and Workplace Resilience \(OCWR\)](#); for Michigan Medicine staff and faculty) and the [Faculty and Staff Counseling and Consultation Office \(FASCCO\)](#); for Ann Arbor, Dearborn, and Flint campus staff and faculty) are available for confidential assistance and may be helpful for providing support for both work and personal concerns. Additional resources like the [Faculty Ombuds](#) or [Staff Ombuds](#) for non-bargained for staff may be helpful.
- Schedule ongoing meetings and follow-up. Regular conversations and check-ins are valuable for supporting your team and responding to emerging concerns.

## QUESTIONS

For counseling and other resources to help faculty, staff, and supervisors with the transition back to work, contact the university’s mental health teams for confidential, short-term counseling, consultation, information, and referrals.

Campus faculty and staff, contact the Faculty and Staff Counseling and Consultation Office (FASCCO). Call (734) 936-8660 or email [fascoco@umich.edu](mailto:fascoco@umich.edu).

Michigan Medicine faculty and staff, contact the Office of Counseling and Workplace Resilience (OCWR). Call 734-763-5409 or email [counseling@med.umich.edu](mailto:counseling@med.umich.edu).