



Building Mental Health into Retail and Hospitality Organizations

A Simple Guide



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

Workplace
Mental Health



Acknowledgments

Mental Health Commission of Canada

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Introduction



The mental health of workers in the retail and hospitality industry is an important issue, one that has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent roundtable, facilitated by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), industry leaders from large, medium, and small businesses across Canada discussed a range of concerns and needs related to improving their workers' mental health. Among other things, participants were looking for guidance on how to implement a workplace mental health strategy that aligns with the [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#) (the Standard).

This guide is designed to help retail and hospitality industry decision makers create the foundation for good workplace mental health. It includes tips, training suggestions, important programs, and conversation guidelines to get you started. Putting these pieces in place will set your organization on the right path for a successful journey toward establishing a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.





The value of a psychologically healthy and safe workplace

Creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace in a busy environment poses certain challenges. To successfully implement a support system and educate employees about workplace mental health, strategies must be accessible, easy to meet, and open to feedback. Building psychological health and safety into your everyday operations makes that easier. To help, the Standard outlines a management system framework that can guide your organization in promoting employee mental health and preventing psychological harm. According to the Standard, “a psychologically healthy and safe workplace is one that actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless, or intentional ways, and promotes psychological well-being” (p. 1).¹

A psychological health and safety management system can also help increase profitability, attract and retain employees, and create a sustainable means for improving mental health across the retail and hospitality industry.

1 Canadian Standards Association. (2013). *National standard of Canada: Psychological health and safety in the workplace – prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation*. <https://www.csagroup.org/article/caninsa-z1003-13-bnq-9700-803-2013-r2018/>

Psychological health and safety policy

The Standard states that a psychological health and safety management system should be integrated into or be compatible with governance practices and other organizational systems. Rather than being a stand-alone strategy, it should be woven into a business in a psychologically healthy and safe manner to support the achievement of an organization's strategic priorities and operations.

One of the best ways to show your commitment to this goal is to make sure your organization has a policy for psychological health and safety that includes the following elements:

PURPOSE	PROCEDURES/ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
POLICY STATEMENT	CONTRAVENTIONS
SCOPE	SIGNED by senior management

A sample policy from [Assembling the Pieces](#), a Standard implementation guide, states the following:

ABC Inc. is committed to the establishment, promotion, maintenance, and continual improvement of a workplace psychological health and safety management system (PHSMS) that:

- Is aligned with our organizational values and ethics and respects the principles of mutual respect, confidentiality and cooperation
- Has the resources (human and financial) and authority needed to ensure successful establishment, promotion, maintenance, and continual improvement of the PHSMS
- Ensures a cross-section of employees (including workers/worker representatives) are involved in the development, implementation, and continual improvement of the system
- Establishes and implements a process to evaluate the effectiveness of the system and implement changes (p. 39)²

2 Canadian Standards Association. (2014). *Assembling the pieces: An implementation guide to the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*. <https://www.csagroup.org/store/product/SPE%20Z1003%20IMPLEMENTATION%20HB/>



Meeting legal requirements

Every organization is required to comply with applicable legislation to protect employees in the workplace. While legal requirements may differ between provinces and territories, employers are responsible for following them and ensuring that workers know their rights.

This section touches on some important requirements and considerations for supporting the mental health of workers. To find more detailed information, refer to the applicable legislation and seek guidance from your regulatory authority or industry association. If you need legal advice, contact a qualified legal professional.

A healthy organization will:

- provide the mandatory education during onboarding
- offer ongoing education to workers about their rights within the specific industry (this may include informal updates)
- take measures to ensure compliance with applicable legal requirements
- have processes and procedures in place to deal with issues that arise regarding legal requirements
- keep up to date with legislation and implement any necessary changes.

Human rights

Employers must protect employees from work-related discrimination and harassment on the basis of the criteria listed in the [Canadian Human Rights Act](#). Under the act, there are 13 grounds for discrimination:

- race
- national or ethnic origin
- colour
- religion
- age
- sex
- sexual orientation
- gender identity or expression
- marital status
- family status
- genetic characteristics
- disability³
- a conviction for which a pardon has been granted or a record has been suspended

If an individual feels they have been discriminated against, based on one or more of these grounds, they can file a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission. In some cases (e.g., federal employees), other tribunals could hear the complaint, although these hearings can be lengthy, highly emotional, and costly.

Harassment and discrimination in retail and hospitality, which have only increased during the pandemic, may come from managers, co-workers, and customers. Policies, procedures, training, and protective measures will help to support the mental health of employees who may be targets, as well as other employees who

may be witnesses or bystanders. See [Supporting the Mental Health of Retail Workers During COVID-19](#) (from the MHCC).

Ensure that your organization has the following items in place:

- an anti-discrimination and harassment policy, posted where it will be seen by employees and customers
- a written code of conduct that includes roles, responsibilities, and procedures
- measures for communicating the policy and code of conduct to all employees
- a training program on anti-discrimination and harassment
- steps employees can take to report concerns and incidents
- procedures for appropriate follow-up and investigation

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) intersect in important ways with psychologically healthy and safe workplaces. Organizations should take steps to understand how workplace factors may affect diverse populations and their mental health. Ensuring that leaders and employees receive training in DEI principles will help businesses implement appropriate strategies and processes, foster workplace belonging, and prevent exclusion. In particular, it will help employees from under-represented groups stay at work, return to work following an absence, and be healthy, safe, and productive on the job.

DEI Resources

- [Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [Implicit Bias](#) (from Workplace Strategies for Mental Health [WSMH])

3 Disability includes “any previous or existing mental or physical disability and includes disfigurement and previous or existing dependence on alcohol or a drug” (Section 25).

Employment standards

While each province or territory has its own employment standards regulations, the [Canada Labour Code](#) covers federal standards. Together, these can help an organization develop a framework of employment conditions for hours of work, payment of wages, leaves, vacations, holidays, and more. Knowing and informing employees about the applicable regulations can help eliminate inconsistencies in the workplace.

In the retail and hospitality industry, work hours are fast paced, long, or varied, and there is a constant need to ensure adequate staffing levels to meet customer demand. Despite these challenges, employers must ensure that employees are taking their entitled breaks. Regular breaks employees can count on help support their well-being and work-life balance.

As an employer, it is your responsibility to inform employees and make sure they are aware of the regulations (as a bare minimum). However, the following aspects should be examined thoroughly:

- hours of work, including maximum and minimum
- leaves, unpaid and paid
- vacations
- breaks
- wages and deductions

Occupational health and safety

The relationship between occupational health and safety and workers' mental health is significant. Physical safety is the most basic human need. Knowing that the employer and manager value health and safety, and strive to comply with occupational health and safety legislation, not only protects workers from physical injury, it also supports their mental health.

Hazards in the physical environment can impact workers' mental health. Here are some key questions to ask:

- What is our organization doing to identify and address how the physical work environment impacts workers' mental health?
- Do our workers feel safe (not concerned or anxious) about their physical work environment?
- Does our work scheduling allow for reasonable rest periods and a balance in the physical, psychological, and social demands on workers?
- Does our work scheduling allow employees time to access available resources designed to help them cope?
- Are we taking all health and safety concerns seriously? What process have we put in place for addressing health and safety concerns and providing feedback to workers?
- Do our managers and workers clearly understand the right to refuse unsafe work? Do our workers have any hesitation about exercising that right, and do our managers respond appropriately?
- Do our workers get sufficient training to perform their work safely (particularly when changes to the physical work environment are necessary)? Have we put practices, procedures, equipment, and personal protective equipment in place to keep them safe?
- Has our organization assessed the psychological demands of its jobs and the job environment to determine whether they present a hazard to workers' health and safety (particularly with respect to necessary changes due to the pandemic)?



Understanding employee needs

Creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace begins with the needs of employees. To create an environment that supports the visions and goals of your staff, you must take time to understand their needs. Here are some important ways to help you do so:

Building trust

- When building relationships with employees, having clear leadership and expectations will help you foster transparency and build trust.
- A foundation of trust is crucial to a healthy workplace, as it solidifies employee success and satisfaction. It also encourages worker involvement and influence (one of the psychological factors identified in the Standard) by creating an environment where employees can talk with supervisors about their work and know that their input is being valued.
- Build relationships with teams and individuals that are not just work related. Have team-building exercises and get creative where possible. This will help everyone get to know each other as people and create safe spaces for discussions related to supporting mental health needs.

Employee engagement

Engaging employees is an important part of meeting individual needs within teams. When people's thoughts and opinions are heard, it helps an organization to move away from assumptions or blanket policies and decisions. Here are some of the many ways to engage employees:

- Don't be afraid to have tough conversations, both in one-on-one and group discussions. Among the free guides on the topic is [Identifying Employee Issues for Leaders](#) (WSMH).
- Create and distribute surveys to understand where help is needed most; for example, with flexible hours or workload management.
- Establish (facilitated) focus groups consisting of small numbers of employees who can share ideas. Such focus groups can foster more substantive discussions that shine a light on the reasons for common workplace issues.
- Use a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to assess your employees' needs. This tool can identify tangible and realistic solutions that enable you to respond to issues in your organization. (See [Assembling the Pieces](#) for further information.)
- Get your health and safety committees and representatives involved in helping to further engage employees.

Privacy and confidentiality

- When discussing sensitive topics, it's important to honour your employees' privacy. When distributing surveys and starting conversations, make sure workers are aware of your organization's confidentiality agreement.
- If an employee discloses personal private information (such as a diagnosis of mental illness), managers (and other employees) need to understand how to support them and make sure they know that their private information will remain confidential.
- Review your policies and procedures around privacy and confidentiality. Ensure that they are up to date, in compliance with applicable legal requirements, and relevant to your organization's structure.
- Respecting privacy and confidentiality helps employees feel safe and respected.

Vulnerability

- As a leader, it is helpful to show vulnerability, so employees can see you as a human being and not just a figure of authority.
- Understanding the needs of your organization requires a sense of vulnerability from both parties.
- This can mean talking with employees about some of the challenges you are facing and being open to listening to them talk about theirs.
- Vulnerability can open the door to collaboration and solutions.

Balance, flexibility, and boundaries

- A work-life balance means that employees have a sense of control over how they manage their work and personal lives (see [Assembling the Pieces](#)).
- Improper work-life balance is a stronger risk factor for mental illness than job stress alone. When properly addressed, work-life balance can help reduce absences at work.
- Time-flexible work arrangements can help employees balance work and personal commitments, creating a stronger sense of control and reducing stress.
- See [What Does Flexible Work Life Look Like?](#) (MHCC)

What to do with the information

After engaging employees and gathering information about your teams' needs, the next step is assessing your strengths and identifying areas that require additional supports. Programs such as psychological health and safety audits can help that process. You can then develop a strategy to address the needs you have identified. To do so, it can be helpful to collaborate with other retail and hospitality organizations that are implementing strategies or lean on the support of industry associations.



Training and competency development

Setting people up for success is an important part of building mental health into your operations. By having the right procedures and education in place for onboarding and orientation, you can be sure that employees will start their journey with the right foundation and the necessary tools. So, what can you do during onboarding and orientation?

- Educate people on their roles and responsibilities.
- Outline policies and procedures clearly from the start, including how to access mental health supports, and what to do if an employee needs help from the organization.
- Educate people about human rights and employment standards.
- Prepare people with the right tools and resources. Do they need more job-specific training? Is there a peer-support group they can get involved with?
- Ensure that the new employee has a clear path forward. They should know what to expect during the onboarding process and understand the achievable goals. To be successful, they need to be well prepared before starting in their roles.

Awareness, education, and communication

How are your messages being communicated? Do leaders know what needs to be said and when?

The following tips can enhance your communication, awareness, and education process:

- Develop a communication plan. Having a plan in place helps you avoid unnecessary messaging and keeps messaging on track when things get busy.
- Provide information using various sources: podcasts, tip sheets, team huddles, lunch rooms, webinars, print media, etc. Doing so allows people to access it in a way that works for them.
- Map out when and how often you will share information. Having a plan helps when work shifts cross or down times occur, and it can ensure consistent messaging.

A sample communication plan is included in the [Appendix](#). If you need help, consider consulting a professional. Since communication is a learned skill, be aware that managers may need some training.

Recognizing declining or improving mental health

Mental health in the workplace doesn't look the same for everyone. Many different signs can arise that show a person needs extra supports, whether it's in their work, their behaviour, or their withdrawal. Being able to recognize these signs and access appropriate care is important. Anti-stigma training, such as [The Working Mind](#) and [Mental Health First Aid](#), can help employees

and managers better understand mental health.

When we are able to support ourselves and our colleagues in the workplace, it opens doors to new conversations and a more productive and positive work environment. It also means people will come to work feeling supported.

Training and competency development for managers and supervisors

Managers and supervisors often need training or coaching to successfully fulfil their roles in creating a psychologically healthy and safe work environment. Before implementing a training plan, take stock of the skills they need to ensure that they themselves are working in a psychologically healthy and safe way. Doing so will in turn help them create a psychologically safe and healthy work environment, and reduce the risk of issues arising that can lead to unresolved conflict and potential liability. Key skill areas for manager and supervisor training include:

- harassment, discrimination, and violence prevention in the workplace
- anti-stigma training (e.g., [The Working Mind: Manager](#) course)
- use of appropriate language
- interpersonal communication
- emotional intelligence
- conflict resolution
- workload management
- performance management
- accommodation and return to work.

Manager's Toolkit

The Manager's Toolkit: Leading in a Hybrid Work Environment (MHCC) offers information that is relevant to the retail and hospitality sector (and others). Topics include:

- addressing performance issues
- conflict resolution
- protecting your own mental health

Crisis preparedness and response

While we all hope to avoid crisis-and-response situations, they inevitably happen. When they do, it is how we react and respond that is crucial. Meeting employees' psychological health and safety needs during a crisis is just as important as meeting their other needs. Here are some ways to prepare for such situations:

- make use of training programs such as [Mental Health First Aid](#), [LifeSpeak](#), and [Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training](#) (ASIST)
- ensure that emergency preparedness plans are readily available
- have communication plans in place specifically for crisis response
- build response plans and update them regularly



Psychological supports

Having psychological supports that meet employees' needs is important, as is communicating and updating them regularly. While many organizations already offer benefits or employee assistance programs, some may not.

Here are some tips to help you create and maintain an up-to-date psychological support system:

Benefits and employee assistance programs

With so many options available for benefit plans, regularly revising them and exploring new choices will both strengthen your psychological supports and increase employee retention. If people feel supported through a benefits plan, it can help reduce their daily stresses; for example, employee assistance programs usually offer counselling services. Make sure to communicate

how to access your organization's supports on a recurring basis.

Community supports

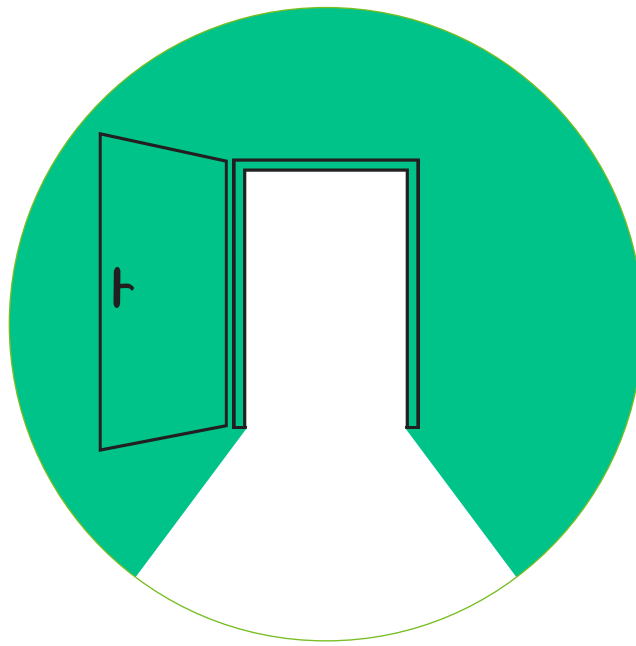
If your organization does not offer such benefits, provide employees with information about accessible community supports. Programs such as [Wellness Together Canada](#) offer free counselling services (such as sources with services for the retail and hospitality industry) and is a great resource for employees and managers.

Peer support

Peer support programs help people in the same industry support one another. Engaging or finding new ways for people in similar roles to collaborate and work together can increase their morale and productivity and give them a sense of belonging and shared experience. While many organizations do not have a peer support group, implementing such a program can help fill a gap. Having a peer-support group within the retail and hospitality industry can also serve this need.

Individual needs

Supports can take many forms. With today's greater emphasis on diversity and inclusion in the workplace, now is the time to look at connecting people with supports that will meet their needs. Doing so might mean reaching out to see the varied services providers offer or researching supports based on individual conversations. While it can be difficult for employees in marginalized groups to find appropriate supports, helping them through this journey is important, both for their mental health and your organization.



Programs

After identifying your employees' needs, consider making adjustments or additions to your policies, programs, and procedures. Many programs can be built into your organization that will support mental health and create a psychologically safe workplace. Here are some important programs, with links to helpful guidance and tools:

- Peer support programs
- Psychological and social support
- Accommodation and return to work — Consider resources like these from WSMH:
 - [Accommodation Strategies](#)
 - [Supporting Employee Success](#)
- Workload management
- Wellness programs
 - [Wellness Awareness Program Calendar](#) (WSMH)
- [Performance Management](#) (WSMH)
- [Evidence-Based Actions for Growth and Development](#) (WSMH)
- [Evidence-Based Actions for Recognition and Reward](#) (WSMH)
- Harassment and violence prevention and response
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace: OSH Answers Fact Sheets](#) (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety)
 - [Harassment and Bullying Prevention](#) (WSMH)



Psychological health and safety foundation checklist

Building mental health into an organization can take time. But tracking the efforts you have already made will help you succeed. If your organization has programs or tools in place, use the checklist to pull them together and assess your next steps. It can also help you identify the programs and processes to establish a basis for success (some are foundational pillars in the Standard) and make your journey toward psychological health and safety easy to track.

Program or Process	Yes	No	In Progress
Do you have a psychological health and safety policy?			
Have you examined and educated employees about human rights policies and procedures?			
Have you examined and educated employees about employment standards rights and responsibilities?			
Have you examined and educated employees about occupational health and safety rights and responsibilities?			
Is there an engagement process employees can use to bring forward their mental health-related concerns?			
Are there different ways for leaders to understand employees' needs (e.g., through surveys, focus groups, or other means)?			
Do you have a plan in place to build trust within teams?			
Have you considered balance, flexibility, and boundaries?			
Have you compiled information (gathered through engagement) and developed an action plan?			
Have you implemented any of the following programs to improve psychological health and safety?			
• peer support			
• psychological and social support			
• accommodation and return to work			
• workload management			
• wellness			
• performance management			
• growth and development			
• recognition and reward			
• harassment and violence prevention and response			
Have you put psychological supports in place for all employees? (List the psychological supports already in place.)			

A woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a white t-shirt and a blue and white striped apron, is smiling and looking up as she hangs a dark wooden sign with the word 'OPEN' in white capital letters. She is holding the sign with both hands, which are wearing white gloves. The sign is being placed on a glass door. In the background, a red neon sign with the letters 'RIB' is visible. The scene is set outdoors at dusk or dawn, with warm lighting and a blurred background of trees and buildings.

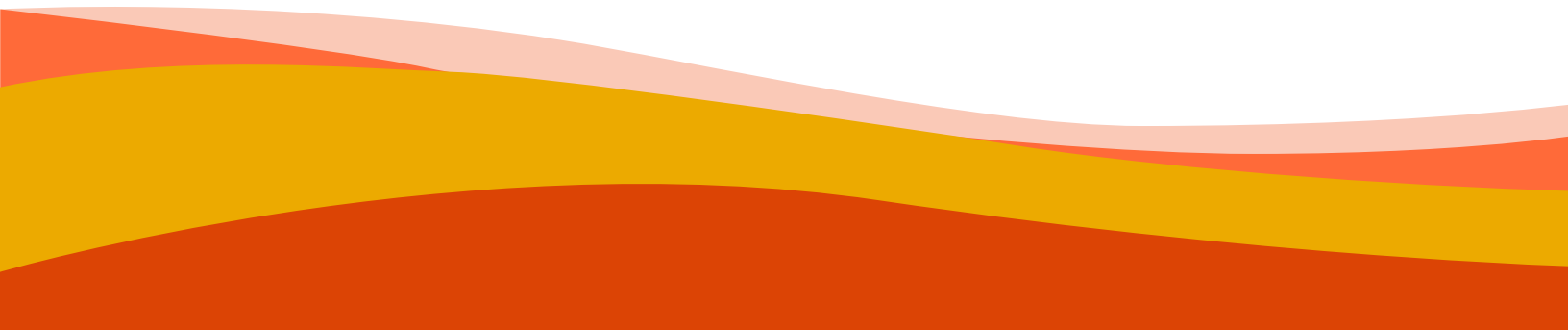
OPEN

OPENING HOURS

MON-FRI **am-3pm**

SAT-SUN **8am-4pm**

Appendix



Sample workplace mental health communication plan

Topic	Stakeholders	Key Content	Methods	Frequency	Responsibility
How to find mental health support	All employees	Contact information for Mental Health First Aid and psychological counselling and therapy	Bulletin board, email, safety talk, all-staff meetings	Upon hiring (onboarding) and monthly	HR and managers

Conversation guides

The following guidelines can assist managers when holding mental health-related conversations with employees. (Find additional guidelines at the WSMH [Supportive Conversation Library](#).)

Purpose: Why should we have these conversations?

Workplace mental health issues are common and can affect performance in a variety of ways, including problems with concentration, memory, decision making, and motivation. While some people living with a mental health concern can manage without it affecting their work performance, others may require short-term or ongoing workplace support. In most cases, such support improves work performance.

Work itself can be beneficial or harmful to mental health, depending on the circumstances. For certain people, working in a supportive environment can assist their process of recovery. The level of support needed can fluctuate, given that mental health issues can come and go over time.

If you notice changes in an employee's work or interactions that may indicate a mental health concern, it is important to discuss it with them, even if work is not a contributing factor.

How to know when to have these conversations: Behavioural and physical indicators

Potential behaviours:

- not getting things done
- appearing withdrawn
- a loss of confidence
- erratic actions
- reduced participation
- an inability to concentrate

Possible physical/physiological indicators:

- tired all the time
- sick and run down
- headaches
- difficulty sleeping
- dishevelled appearance
- weight loss or gain

How to help

If an employee is feeling distressed, be sure not to ignore them – doing nothing can make the situation worse. When talking with them, be non-judgmental and open.

Plan your approach. Know in advance what you want to say. Be aware of your organization's policies and procedures for accommodating employees with mental health issues and be sure to recommend their use.

Pick a time and place that will ensure your meeting is confidential and free from distractions. Allow time for your discussion, and don't rush your employee into talking if they are not comfortable.

Confidentiality and trust

- Maintain confidentiality and privacy, except where there is a concern for the person's safety (or that of others). Be clear about these limits early on in the conversation.
- Build a supportive environment when discussing changes in behaviour by giving the individual personal space, using appropriate eye contact, asking open-ended questions, and allowing them time to talk.
- Remember, you don't need to have all the answers. What's important is that you listen non-judgmentally and demonstrate empathy and respect.

Having the conversation

- When talking with the person, describe the specific reasons for your concern. Express them clearly in a non-confrontational way, using examples of what you feel are concerning changes.
- Ask the person whether any workplace stressors or other issues are contributing to their mental health concern. Not all workplace stressors affect everyone the same way. If workplace stressors are a factor, offer to help them find appropriate information and support.
- Encourage the use of any coping strategies that have helped in the past. If the person has a relapse management plan, follow the instructions. Have a discussion about supporting the person's existing coping strategies. Make sure the person is aware of relevant organizational supports (e.g., employee assistance or similar programs) and any supports outside of work that may be helpful.
- Consider workplace accommodations. If the employee is having difficulties with their performance because of a mental health issue, ask if they need a workplace accommodation (be prepared to explain the concept).
- At the end of the conversation, you should both agree about what will happen next and who will take action. If you feel distressed after the conversation, find someone to talk to for support and advice, while maintaining the employee's privacy. Remember: your actions may still make a difference, even if expectations are not met — the person you spoke to may be encouraged to seek further help.



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