

# IHSA's Brave Conversations Toolkit



“Brave Conversations at Work” explains how to talk about mental health and well-being with your co-workers.

This toolkit includes practical advice for tackling important workplace issues, such as addiction and the stigma surrounding mental illness. Whether you are a tradesperson, supervisor, human resources (HR) professional, or board member, this guide can help you make your workplace more inclusive.

## What are brave conversations?

You have a brave conversation when you check in with a co-worker and have an open discussion about mental health—even if it feels scary or uncomfortable to do so. These interactions are “brave” because they require you to step outside of your comfort zone and challenge stigma.

These conversations might involve the following activities:

- Asking a co-worker if they are okay
- Sharing your own mental health challenges
- Advocating for systemic change within your organization if the conditions at your workplace are negatively affecting workers’ mental health

## Tips for brave conversations

[Buddy Up](#), an initiative from the Centre for Suicide Prevention, offers several tips for starting a conversation about mental health: pay attention, start a conversation, keep it going, react appropriately, and follow up with resources.

## Pay attention

If your co-worker's behaviour changes in any noticeable way, they might be struggling and need support. These changes might include the following behaviours:

- Drinking or using drugs more often than usual
- Talking about how bad life is
- Appearing tired or distant
- Becoming irritated or angry easily

## Start a conversation

Choose a comfortable setting, such as on the phone, at your favourite hangout spot, or on a shared project. Avoid blaming or shaming your co-worker. Mention what you have noticed, then start with a simple question such as, "how are you doing?"

## Keep it going

Ask your co-worker open-ended questions and listen thoughtfully to their answers. For example, you could say something like, "The other day you said, 'life sucks.' What did you mean by that?"

Avoid jumping into problem-solving mode: acknowledge their feelings and let them know you are there to listen.

## React appropriately

If you think that your co-worker may be considering self-harm or suicide, ask them. Do not panic if they say yes. Call 911 to request assistance from emergency services or take them to the hospital if you think they are in immediate danger of harming themselves.

If your co-worker is not in immediate danger but is thinking about suicide or self-harm, call the [Suicide Crisis Helpline at 988](#). Suicide and mental health crisis responders are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

## Follow up with resources

Accessing mental health resources can be difficult, especially for people who are in a mental health crisis. Direct your co-worker to any resources your workplace offers—such as an Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP), accommodations, or peer support groups—and encourage them to speak to their supervisor, HR, or union steward.

## Brave conversations with male co-workers

Men are less likely than women to seek out mental health support, even though they are just as likely to struggle with a mental illness. They are often taught to keep their feelings to themselves, avoid vulnerability, and view seeking help as "unmanly." These outdated ideas about masculinity can make it difficult for men to talk about their mental health.

Using [Movember's interactive tool for practicing conversations](#), you can rehearse having a discussion with a male co-worker who you think might be struggling. The tool encourages you to use the ALEC method: Ask, listen, encourage action, and check in.

## How to recognize when a co-worker needs support

It can be difficult to spot when a co-worker is struggling with their mental health, especially in professional settings where most people try to conceal their negative emotions.

However, there are common signs that someone may need support.

A person whose mental health is declining might show the following behaviours:

- Doubt their abilities or appear less confident
- Struggle with concentration, learning, or decision-making
- Withdraw socially
- Struggle to perform their job functions
- Experience sudden and drastic mood swings

Watch Workplace Strategies for Mental Health's [mental health awareness videos](#) to learn more.

## Why talk about mental health at work?

Several workplace factors can affect worker mental health, such as organizational culture, job demands, and work-life balance. Workers can play a positive role by supporting their co-workers who may have mental health or addiction issues. Employees may not feel comfortable asking for support if their workplace culture discourages discussions about mental health and well-being.

## Information for people leaders

Organizational leaders and supervisors should have a baseline understanding of mental illness and strategies for supporting affected workers. In its [Recognizing Declining Mental Health in Employees](#) toolkit, the Mental Health Commission of Canada says managers can recognize declining mental health in employees in several ways:

1. Look for changes in mood, behaviour, or performance.
2. Create a safe space for open conversations about mental health.
3. Have regular check-ins and meetings.
4. Share internal and external resources.
5. Take [The Working Mind for the Trades](#) and [Mental Health First Aid](#) training

## Become a good listener

When an employee discloses a mental health problem, they alone decide how much information to share with colleagues. However, you can support them by being a non-judgmental listener.

Use these tips to improve your listening skills:

- Keep eye contact and be mindful of involuntary facial expressions (e.g., a furrowed brow or squinting can make you look confused or skeptical).
- Do not interrupt the speaker or try to fill pauses.
- Do not hesitate to ask for clarification, if needed.
- Focus on understanding the speaker's perspective instead of immediately thinking about how to respond.
- After the conversation, reflect and follow up with them.

## Encourage brave conversations

You can use health and safety resources to proactively encourage brave conversations:

- Deliver [IHSA's mental health and substance use resources](#) and review the [facilitator's guide for talking about mental health at your workplace \(W131\)](#).

- Download [resources from Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#) on key mental health topics, such as emotional intelligence and resilience and engagement and culture.

## Be self-aware

Review the following resources from Workplace Strategies for Mental Health to build self-awareness and leadership skills:

- [Emotional intelligence for leaders](#)
- [Emotional intelligence self-assessment](#)
- [Implicit bias](#)

Then, check out more resources for people leaders:

- Workplace Strategies for Mental Health's [mental health awareness weekly email series](#) and [healthy break activities](#)
- [HelpGuide.org's weekly mental health newsletter](#)

## Resources

### Training

The following training courses can help you better understand mental health, addiction, and opioid use:

#### [\*\*\*The Working Mind for the Trades\*\*\*](#) (IHSA)

Course objectives:

- Understand mental health and mental illness
- Recognize and reduce stigma
- Support your colleagues
- Recognize stressors and build resilience

#### [\*\*\*Opening the Door to Support\*\*\*](#) (IHSA)

Course objectives:

- Learn practical skills to foster a psychologically healthy workplace and support your co-workers.
- Break down stigma
- Identify signs of mental illness

#### [\*\*\*Naloxone\*\*\*](#) (IHSA)

Course objectives:

- Identify an opioid overdose
- Respond to an opioid overdose and administer naloxone
- Control hazards related to administering naloxone.
- Explain the purpose of the Good Samaritan Act

#### [\*\*\*LivingWorks Start\*\*\*](#) (LivingWorks)

Course objectives:

- Recognize when someone may be thinking of suicide and connect them to help
- Start a brave conversation about suicide

## IHSA Health and Safety Podcasts

- [Episode 33: “Mental Health \(Part One\)”](#)
- [Episode 34: “Mental Health \(Part Two\) - Beginning the Dialogue in the Workplace”](#)
- [Episode 35: “Mental Health \(Part Three\) - Challenging Stigma and Reducing Mental Harm”](#)
- [Episode 36: “Mental Health \(Part Four\) - Toxic Masculinity”](#)
- [Episode 38: “Understanding Opioids and the Crisis in Canada”](#)
- [Episode 41: “Assessing Your Mental Health”](#)
- [Episode 42: “Declining Mental Health and Suicide Risk \(Part One\)”](#)
- [Episode 43: “Understanding Opioids and the Crisis in Canada \(Part Two\)”](#)
- [Episode 70: “Trauma Management in the Workplace”](#)
- [Episode 72: “Building Your Occupational Health and Safety System”](#)
- [Episode 80: “Women in Construction Health and Safety”](#)
- [Episode 83: “The Construction Athlete”](#)
- [Episode 84: “Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace”](#)
- [Episode 88: “Nutrition”](#)
- [Episode 91: “The Working Mind for the Trades”](#)

## Digital products

- [My Mental Health Worker Toolkit](#) (IHSA)
- [Mental health safety talks: facilitator’s guide \(W131\)](#) (IHSA)
- [“Resources for employees”](#) webpage and [“Approaches for people leaders”](#) webpages (Workplace Strategies for Mental Health)
- [Mental Health 101](#) self-paced training platform (CAMH)
- [Opioid-related risk factors at work safety talk](#) (IHSA)
- [Declining mental health and suicide risk safety talk](#) (IHSA)

## Mental health supports

**ConnexOntario:** Resources related to mental health, drugs, alcohol, and gambling, plus advice on how to navigate support services.

- Call: 1-866-531-2600
- [Live web chat](#)
- [Email](#)

**211 Ontario:** Information and referrals for community, government, social, and health services across Ontario (GTA focused).

- Call: 2-1-1 (toll-free: 1-877-330-3213)
- [Live web chat](#)
- [Email](#)

**Ontario.ca:** Features an extensive list of community-based services to support you and those whom you may be helping to find support.

**CAMH Crisis Resources webpage:** A list of resources available for areas in and around Toronto, including several multilingual offerings.