

Mental Illness at Work: How to Provide Support

When a co-worker is struggling, it can be difficult to know what to do or say to be supportive. The tips below will help you open up communication and offer suggestions on how to help.

- 1. Invite conversation.** Choose a place to talk that is private and quiet and the person feels comfortable. You may consider a neutral space outside of the workplace.
- 2. Provide a safe space to talk.** Some people find it difficult to talk about their mental health, so keep an open mind and refrain from sharing your opinions and beliefs. Ask simple questions and let them talk openly about their experiences, symptoms, triggers, impacts on work and support they need.
- 3. Don't make assumptions.** Everyone's experience of mental illness is different. Don't assume that you know all about their situation or how their illness affects them or their work.
- 4. Ensure confidentiality.** Sensitive information should be shared with as few people as possible. Discuss with the individual what information they would like shared and with whom—if anyone.
- 5. Be flexible.** Focus on the person, not the problem. Involve them in finding solutions to any work related difficulties. Remember that effective workplace adjustments are often simple and inexpensive. Be creative and keep an open mind.
- 6. Be honest and clear.** If you have specific concerns such as poor attitude or work performance problems,

address them early. Be direct and honest, but also compassionate and concerned.

- 7. Develop an action plan.** Encourage your co-worker to take steps to improve their work performance and actively engage in recovery. Help them identify strengths, struggles, triggers, people to contact for support, and coping strategies and tools to overcome obstacles. Set a time to meet again and review the plan to see how it is working and what changes can be made.
- 8. Encourage them to seek support.** You may suggest that they speak to their manager to request additional support or accommodations, or that they reach out to your organization's Employee Assistance Program for free and confidential counseling. In addition to formal support, encourage your co-worker to confide in friends, family members, clergy, and others who may help. Social connection is a cornerstone of successful recovery.
- 9. Keep an open door.** Some people don't want to open up, and that's ok. Offer information about what resources are available, tell them you are always willing to talk, and let them know you'll do what you can to help them get the support they need.
- 10. Seek advice and support yourself.** In order to help and care for others, you need to be healthy, well and of sound mind. Take your own advice and strive to live a healthy lifestyle with plenty of support from others.

For more ideas on how to help a coworker who may be struggling with mental illness, contact Ascension WI EAP. Free and confidential help from a licensed counselor is only a phone call away.