

Supportive Colleague

how to be a

a guide for UWindsor

Supporting a Colleague in Distress

At the University of Windsor, we all share in fostering an environment that is supportive of mental health and psychological safety. At times, colleagues may struggle or experience mental health challenges or distress. You do not need to be a mental health professional to listen, offer care and support, and refer to resources. This guide provides strategies for UWindsor employees to recognize and support a colleague who may be struggling.

Recognize

While the signs that someone is struggling will depend on the person and situation, the following may suggest that a colleague needs support:

- Significant changes in appearance or behaving in a manner that seems unusual or out of character for the individual
- Displaying unusual disinterest or disregard for work and marked changes in concentration
- Expressions of frustration, prolonged irritability, and/or outbursts of anger that seem out of character
- Withdrawing or isolating from others
- Expression of suicidal thoughts or feelings of hopelessness

It is not your role as a colleague to attempt to diagnose or offer counselling or advice; however, it is important to trust your instincts and check in with your colleague when you are concerned.

Respond

You may feel unsure of how to respond when concerned about a colleague; grounding your approach in empathy and engaging in active listening can help a colleague feel supported and heard. Be sure to avoid making assumptions and listen with an open mind. You should also reach out to your supervisor for guidance. When checking in with a colleague, the following tips can help:

- Find a quiet and confidential space for the conversation if possible.
- Express your observations and concern: *I've noticed you seem upset recently. I'm here to listen if you'd like to talk.*
- Listen attentively, being mindful of your body language and tone. Summarize what you hear to ensure you understand: *It sounds like you have been dealing with a lot of stress lately.*
- Ask open-ended questions as needed to help you understand the situation better.
- Offer hope and reassurance: *You are not alone in handling this.*
- Allow your colleague to lead the interaction. *Is there anything you need?* Sometimes, being there to listen is enough. In other cases, a referral to resources may be helpful.

Resources

In addition to providing information on resources, it is important to assure your colleague that they deserve support and that seeking help is a sign of strength.

In non-emergency situations, you can ask your colleague if they would like information on available resources: *Would you like me to provide you information on how to connect with some resources? Seeking support is a positive and courageous step.* **[Access a guide to mental health resources here.](#)**

Your colleague may decline your offer of support or not follow up on a referral, and it is important to respect their choice: *I respect your choice. Please know that I am here to talk or provide any resources if you would like them in the future* **(in emergencies, it is still critical to contact emergency services).**

If there is imminent risk to the safety of your colleague or others, contact **emergency services via 911** or on campus **ext. 4444** for emergency contact with the UWindsor Special Constable Service.

Signs of risk to safety include:

- immediate safety concerns related to suicidal thoughts or behaviours
- violence or threatening behaviour toward self or others
- a medical emergency, including related to drugs or alcohol

Be sure to alert your immediate supervisor after notifying emergency services in an emergency situation.

Follow-up & Self-care

After your initial conversation with your colleague, it can be helpful to follow up with them at a later date to see how they are doing: *How have things been going since we last talked?*

It is also important to check in with yourself. Supporting a colleague in distress can take an emotional toll on the person offering support. Practicing self-care in the form of mindfulness, exercise, hobbies, or other healthy behaviours that support your mental health, as well as reaching out to services as needed, is critical to maintain your own well-being.

You may also need to set compassionate boundaries around how much support you can provide your colleague: *I care about your well-being, and I'd like to connect you with resources that are better able to provide support than I am.*

Taking care of yourself can ensure that you can continue to be a supportive colleague to others.

Employee Mental Health Resources

- To access the Employee Assistance Plan (EAP), visit [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\) | Human Resources \(uwindsor.ca\)](#).
- For employee and community mental health resources, visit [Employee Mental Health Resources](#).



For information on fostering a supportive workplace environment, please refer to the "Fostering a Supportive Workplace" guide.