Australian National University

Manager Guide – Recognising and Responding to Staff in Distress in the Workplace

The purpose of this document is to provide general guidance for ANU managers and staff to identify and support staff experiencing distress.

This document provides a range of resources and supports on wellbeing, mental health signs, responding to mental health signs, conversations guides, and supports and resources in the workplace.

Contact: If you need additional support or have questions, please get in touch with the Injury Management Team at injurymanagement@anu.edu.au

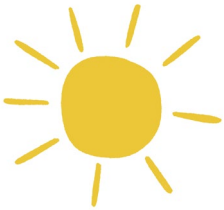
What is mental health?

Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological and social well-being.



The Mental Health Continuum

Rather than viewing mental health as a fixed state, the continuum helps us understand that people can move back and forth along this range depending on various factors such as stress, life events, support systems, and coping strategies.



Healthy | Individuals may experience high levels of resilience, emotional balance, and functioning.

Unsettled | Individuals may face mild or moderate challenges like anxiousness or low mood, which may be managed with support and self-care.





Struggling | Individuals may be experiencing more serious conditions such as depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which may require professional support.

What You Might Notice

When a person begins to experience mental health challenges, there is often a noticeable change in their behaviour, mood, or daily functioning. These changes can be subtle or significant. Recognising these shifts is important and they may signal that someone is not coping and could benefit from support. Being attentive to changes and checking in with care can make a meaningful difference.

Behavioural:

- Visibly upset or crying.
- Unable to concentrate or focus on tasks.
- Withdrawal from social interactions or team activities.
- Decline in work performance or motivation.
- Increased absenteeism or lateness.
- Avoidance of responsibilities or tasks.
- Risk-taking or reckless behaviors.
- Substance misuse (alcohol, drugs).
- Expressing thoughts of self-harm or suicide. (requires immediate

Emotional:

- Persistent sadness or low mood.
- Irritability or mood swings.
- Anxiety or excessive worry.
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.

Physical:

- Change in physical appearance.
- Changes in sleep patterns.
- Frequent headaches.
- Muscle tension.
- Restless or agitation.
- Unexplained aches and pains.



General guidance for responding to mental health concerns

Preparing for a mental health conversation involves creating a safe, respectful and supportive environment.

1. Prepare for the conversation

- Check in with yourself first.
- Ensure you have enough time.
- Find a private and quiet space.
- Consider writing down your thoughts before the meeting with the person.
- Remember to listen.
- Avoid interrupting or offering unsolicited advice.



2. Start the conversation with empathy and openness

3. Listen and acknowledge their concerns

4. Offer support and resources

5. Follow up/check in

Remember to listen actively, respect privacy, offer resources, and follow up.

Remember not to dismiss or minimise concerns, share details without consent, and push for personal details.

General Conversation Guide

Do's

- “Thanks for meeting with me. I wanted to check in and see how you’re doing.”
- “I’ve noticed you haven’t seemed yourself lately – how are things going?”
- “Would you like to talk about what’s been affecting you?”
- “What support would be helpful for you right now?”
- “Would you like me to help you connect with HR, Injury Management or EAP?”
- “We can look at adjusting your workload or schedule if that helps?”

Don’ts

- “Hey, did you lift it the wrong way and can you still finish all the things you need to do?”.
- “What’s wrong with you? Everyone else seems to be coping alright.”
- “You’ll be right, just push through!”.
- “I don’t know what support there is for you, you’ll need to find out.”
- “I don’t have time for this, just lodge a Figtree incident and someone will be in contact.”
- “We need you at full capacity right now so there’s no room for changing your workload.”



Supports and Resources



In Area

- Supervisor or Manager
- Human Resources Business Partner
- Work Health Safety Consultant



Injury Management

- Workplace Adjustments
- Return to work



ANU Supports

- Staff Adviser
- Staff Respect Consultant
- Mental Health First Aiders
- ANU Medical Centre
- Mental Health First Aid courses



Injury Prevention

- Occupational Strains Liaison
- Wellbeing leave
- Community of Practice sessions
- Health & Wellbeing SharePoint



External Supports

- Employee Assistance Program
- UniSuper 360
- Medical professionals
- Counsellors and psychologists
- Find a helpline - wherever you are
- Lifeline - 24/7 Crisis Support
- 13YARN - Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander crisis support
- Job Access - Disability support