

# How to ask staff **RU OK?**

A practical guide for the workplace



## **Funding partner:**

This is a modified version of a resource produced with funding support from Bristow; a major partner and proud sponsor of R U OK?'s Afield campaign targeting people working in fly-in fly-out workplaces.



## **Content expertise:**

This resource was developed with the input and oversight from The Centre for Corporate Health; recognised as leading experts in building resilient workplaces.



## Why use this?

**A place where asking the question “are you ok?” can really work is in the workplace. As employers or staff, we can all create a culture where people feel confident asking and answering this most important question.**

To help you manage conversations with individuals struggling in the workplace, we’ve developed this practical guide. We want to help you ask “Are you Ok?” of any team member who might be struggling and then respond appropriately and safely to anyone who says that they’re not.



# What's in the guide?

Simple, practical tools to help you:

- 1 How do I know if someone needs support? (p5)
- 2 Simple steps to talk to a staff member who's not ok (p8)
- 3 Supporting a team member in critical danger (p16)
- 4 How to manage emotional reactions in a conversation (p18)
- 5 Useful contacts for a staff member who's not ok (p21)



# How do I know if someone needs support?

Over the last fortnight, have you noticed 2 or more of the below?

## 1. Changes in their physical appearance?

---

- Look more tired than usual
- Seem “flat” or drained of energy
- Have had a pattern of illness or being constantly run down
- Are complaining of physical health issues such as headaches or migraines
- Are eating much more or much less than usual
- Are drinking more alcohol than usual
- Seem more fidgety and nervous than usual

## 2. Changes in mood?

---

- Seem more irritable, snappy and fly off the handle when they didn't use to
- Appear more anxious and worried about everything (i.e. work and personal things)
- React more emotionally than the situation deserves
- Are quick to anger
- Appear to be overwhelmed by tasks that they had previously found manageable

### 3. Changes in behaviour?

---

- Seem more withdrawn than usual
- Don't seem to enjoy hobbies/ interests like they use to
- Seem to have difficulty concentrating or seem constantly distracted
- Are taking on more work to avoid being in social situations with others
- Are not performing to their usual standard

### 4. Changes in how thoughts are expressed?

---

- Communicate a tendency to catastrophise everything (“It’s always terrible...”)
- Seem to interpret situations negatively.  
For instance, they might conclude that two people in a meeting are discussing their performance or future with the company
- Personalise situations (“I knew I’d get the toughest roster – they’ve got it in for me”)
- Have thoughts that sound more confused or irrational
- Are complaining about constant thoughts and difficulty switching them off

If you have noticed 2 or more of any of these for any team member, that person might need some extra support. **It’s time for you to start a conversation.**





# Simple steps

to talk to a staff member who's not ok

## Getting ready to ask



1. Be ready



2. Be prepared



3. Pick your moment

## Starting a conversation



1. Ask R U OK?



2. Listen without judgement



3. Encourage action



4. Follow up



# Getting ready to ask



## 1. Be ready

- Are you in a good headspace?
- Are you willing to genuinely listen?
- Can you give as much time as needed?



## 2. Be prepared

- Remember that you won't have all the answers (which is ok)
- Listening is one of the most important things you can do
- If someone is talking about personal struggles this can be difficult and they might get emotional, embarrassed or upset



### 3. Pick your moment

- Have you chosen somewhere relatively private and informal?
- What time will be good for them to chat? Make sure you have allowed yourself at least an hour in your diary so you have ample time
- If they can't talk when you approach them, ask them for a better time to come back

## Starting a conversation



### 1. Ask R U OK?

- Be relaxed
- Help them open up by asking questions like "How you going?" or "What's been happening?" or "I've noticed that you're not quite yourself lately. How are you travelling?"
- Mention specific things that have made you concerned for them, like "I've noticed that you seem really tired recently" or "You seem less chatty than usual. How are you going?"



## 2. Listen without judgement

- Take what they say seriously
- Don't interrupt or rush the conversation
- If they need time to think, try and sit patiently with the silence
- Encourage them to explain
- If they get angry or upset, stay calm and don't take it personally
- Let them know you're asking because you're concerned



## 3. Encourage action

- Ask them: "Where do you think we can go from here?"
- Ask: "What would be a good first step we can take?"
- Ask: "What do you need from me? How can I help?"
- Good options for action might include talking to family, a trusted friend, their doctor or Employee Assistance Provider
- Record your local EAP contact here, so you can pass it on:

---

• Record another local health service here, so you can pass it on:

---

• Record the contact details for your Human Resources Department here:

---



## 4. Follow up

- Remember to follow up in a few days to check in and see how the person is doing
- Ask if they've found a better way to manage the situation
- If they haven't done anything, don't judge them because they might just need someone to listen to them for the moment
- You could ask, "Do you think it would be useful if we looked into finding some professional or other support?"
- Understand that sometimes it can take a long time for someone to be ready to see a professional
- Try and remain optimistic about the benefits of getting help and try not to judge them

A middle-aged man with a grey beard and balding head, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a green and white striped tie, is smiling and holding a white sign with both hands. The sign has a yellow speech bubble shape in the center containing the text 'RUOK, MATE?'. Below the speech bubble, on the white background of the sign, is the text 'Ask the question. Change a life. Visit ruokday.com' on the left and the 'RUOK' logo on the right. The background is a yellow wall with some black text and a palm tree visible in the distance.

**RUOK, MATE?**

Ask the question. Change a life.  
Visit [ruokday.com](http://ruokday.com)

**RUOK**





**RUOK?**<sup>TM</sup>  
A conversation could change a life.

**RUOK, MATE?**

Ask the question. Change a life.  
Visit [ruokday.com](http://ruokday.com)

**RUOK**<sup>TM</sup>  
A conversation could change a life.



**RUOK?**<sup>TM</sup>  
change a life.

**RUOK?**  
change a life.

...ers...ould o...nge

# If I think a team member is in critical danger, what do I do?

## Step 1 : Assess intent

- Ask things like: “When you say your life is not worth living, are you thinking about taking your own life?”
- Or ask: “When you say ‘I can’t go on anymore’ it made me concerned about your safety. Are you thinking about suicide?”
- If they say yes, then move to step 2. If they say no, discontinue assessment but remind them about supports they can call on (these are all provided at the end of this guide on page 21)

## Step 2 : Assess planning

- Ask them: “Have you thought about how you might die?”
- If the answer is “yes”, then move to step 3
- If the answer is “no”, then connect the person up with EAP, treating practitioner, HR or other support function

### Step 3: Assess means

- Ask: “How are you planning to do that?”
- Then ask: “How available is that to you?”
- If they do have means, then move to step 4
- If they do not have means, then connect them up with support functions or escort them to a medical professional

### Step 4 : Assess timing

- Ask them: “When are you thinking of taking your life?”
- They are high risk if they say “Yes, I have a plan” or “Yes, I have a time frame”
- If they’re high risk, then the team member requires immediate escort to hospital admission or into the care of their treating psychologist or psychiatrist. They must be accompanied until they are handed into the care of a specialist

## How to manage emotional reactions in a conversation

From time to time, all leaders are faced with strong reactions from their team during important conversations.

Here are some things you can do to minimise awkwardness and reduce the pressure in these situations:

- Be prepared
- Recognise their reaction may be in response to a range of circumstances - both personal and work-related - many of which you might not know about
- Allow the person to express their emotions fully (i.e. let off steam) and show them that you're interested by actively listening to all they say
- Deal with the emotions first, you can then discuss the issues more rationally once emotions have been addressed
- Being a good listener is one of the best things you can do for someone when they are distressed
- Manage your own emotions by staying calm and not taking things personally
- Validate the person's response but keep the focus on the issue at hand as the main point of the conversation



## How do I deal with anger?

- If someone is visibly hostile you can respond with: “I can see that this has upset you. Why don’t you start at the beginning and tell me what I need to know...”
- Allow them to identify all the factors they feel are contributing to their anger
- You might encourage them by adding “Right, I understand that..... is also a problem. What else?”
- Be patient and prepared to listen to them itemise all the points
- Use active listening to keep the conversation on track and to reassure the other person that you are interested in all they say. Asking this can be helpful: “So, the thing that is really upsetting you is.... – is that right?”
- If they feel they have been wronged or treated unfairly you are unlikely to persuade them otherwise in this conversation. It’s more constructive to listen to all they have to say and provide resources and formal channels for specific complaints to be heard

## How do I deal with anxiety?

- Speak in short, concise sentences
  - If you anticipate an anxious response, use your preparation time to construct your message in clear, brief sentences
  - Make sure you appear calm. This is best displayed through deep, slow breathing, a lower tone of voice and evenly paced speech
- 

## How do I deal with sadness?

- Sad or tragic stories are often difficult to deal with because we empathise with the person and feel helpless as we cannot take away their sadness or pain
- Use lots of empathetic phrases, such as “It sounds like you’re juggling a few things at the moment” or “I understand this must be challenging for you right now”
- Ensure that the best internal support is available, such as the EAP
- Make sure you’re comfortable with any silence in the conversation
- Know that silence gives them permission to add more and to tell you everything

- If someone begins to cry, sit quietly and allow them to cry. Lowering your eyes can minimise their discomfort. You could add “I’m going to sit here with you and when you’re ready we can keep talking”
  - If you anticipate this response, make sure you have tissues handy
- 

## **What are useful contacts for someone who’s not ok?**

- Record your Employee Assistance Program here:
- 

- Record local health service number here:
- 

- Record your HR contact here:
- 

- Lifeline (crisis support, 24/7): 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service (professional telephone crisis support): 1300 659 467
- beyondblue (info about anxiety and depression): 1300 22 4636
- SANE Australia (info about mental illness and referral): 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- More contacts: [ruok.org.au/find-help](https://ruok.org.au/find-help)







**For more information and tips**  
**[ruok.org.au](https://ruok.org.au)**