

Key do's and don'ts for mental health check-ins

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When concerned about an employee's mental health, leaders too often take responsibility for their issues, or go into "solving mode", a wellbeing specialist says.

But instead of these responses it's better to empower the individual, says The Blueberry Institute MD **Fleur Heazlewood** in her new book, [Leading Wellbeing: A leader's guide to mental health conversations at work](#).

"Empowering action is all about either encouraging a person to take an action that they feel comfortable with, or supporting them in taking actions that they believe will assist them in their healing journey," she says.



Fleur Heazlewood, The Blueberry Institute

Key to "staying out of solving mode" is asking questions and not making suggestions.

"There are four parts to empowering action and none of them involve problem-solving, fixing, project-managing or assuming responsibility for the actions that the person we are concerned for may take," Heazlewood says. What they *do* involve is giving hope, connecting the person to supports, encouraging action, and checking back in.

Leaders can give hope by normalising mental health problems and showing it's okay and appropriate to discuss them. They can thank the employee for sharing, remind them that struggles in this area are normal – one in five people experience mental health issues every year – and draw their attention to the range of support options available.

It helps to both determine what professional and social supports they could draw on outside of work, and to ask, "how can we support you at work?", Heazlewood says.

If the employee is responsive to a conversation about support, their leader might encourage them to consider strategies and steps that might have helped in the past; if the employee draws a blank they can ask if they'd like help to come up with ideas for possible sources of support.

"As leaders, we are not qualified to hypothesise about or diagnose mental health problems, or prescribe solutions or treatment, so we want to encourage the person we are concerned about to speak to a professional who can," Heazlewood notes. "Most people's most familiar, low-cost and accessible medical professional will be their family doctor," but it helps for leaders to have knowledge of a range of options.

As for social support, leaders can ask the employee if they have or could speak to their partner, a family member, or a close friend. Casting the net further, they could ask what community groups the employee is in, or whether they'd consider joining one.

"Are they part of a sporting team, or is there a special-interest group they could join, such as a book club? Is there someone who they could speak with there?"

If an employee doesn't want to speak to the leader about support, the leader should respect their autonomy and agency, but also remind the person they'll be there for them if they change their mind.

"Regardless of whether someone wants your help or not, it is important that you check back in with them to see how they are going," Heazlewood notes. "This demonstrates that you really want to know how they are, and that your offer of support is genuine."

If a person is eager for support but likely to procrastinate, the leader might say, "is it okay if I check back in with you? I would like to see how you are going at the end of the week", to further encourage action. When they do so, they should ask neutral, open-ended questions, such as "how have you been feeling since we last spoke?" as opposed to "have you been feeling better?".

In a further HR Daily Premium article, Heazlewood sets out the five steps leaders can take to build their "conversation competence". Premium members can [click through to read](#), or [upgrade your basic subscription](#) for access.

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