Be brave, be constructive and be solution focused

Sometimes we face the challenge of managing a conversation with people who have or are currently exhibiting signs of stress.

When picking up with someone on issues that suggest they are in a very negative emotional space, or really struggling to cope, we can worry about how our approach to the conversation could impact their wellbeing. Whether there is an issue or not, it is important to start the conversation with the expectation that you can work with the person to support them. In doing so you’ll be able to influence three things:

- **the level of pressure they experience at work** – you may be able to understand and reduce the demands placed on them

- **the way in which they cope** – you can provide them with advice and information from our personal resilience worksheets on how they can use coping mechanisms and support systems to cope with the pressure they face

- **their attitude to dealing with their pressure and taking responsibility for this** – these issues are not yours to solve, you can only advise, support and influence your staff member and their environment.

Aim of the conversation

It is important that this conversation starts from a position of positive intent – it is not your job to ‘fix’ the person’s emotional reactions or mental health problems. By focusing on understanding and influencing the factors that impact your team member’s wellbeing, you will be better able to impact these factors and also their performance at work.

Your input should build an expectation that you will both take responsibility to ensure you are paying attention to the things that can impact on their wellbeing.

It is worth supporting your team member in considering how they get clarity of priorities in their role as they begin to navigate pressure, by paying attention to the things that are important to us in the workplace – such as goals and targets – we can better focus on key priorities and make informed decisions about things such as support requirement and work environment adjustments.
Understanding your colleagues’ pressures

Working with your team member to get past their emotional reaction in order to start a constructive conversation about what it is in their working environment that is making them feel overwhelmed or stressed is important. The three pillars of wellbeing within the NHS give a great framework to look constructively at the pressures they face as a basis of giving you both an indication of what you can each influence to reduce the pressures they feel they face.

Using the action planning sheet from the toolkit will give you a structure to base a factual conversation around. It may be you ask your team member to complete this form or a draft of the more detailed action plan in preparation for your conversation with them.

It can be provided as pre-work for your colleague to allow them to think through the issues they face as well.

Planning the meeting

Step 1: Plan thinking - What to do if you have not read about your colleague?
- Has their performance changed? Are they overwhelmed? Has their workload increased? Have they experienced a recent significant change in their role or tasks, for example, when they were made seconded to another team? Have they had a recent change in reporting line?
- How has their relationship with work changed? Have you noticed their attendance or punctuality? Have they been absent more frequently than usual or been late more often?
- Have you noticed a change in their voice or in the way they speak? Have you noticed any changes in their handwriting or appearance?
- How is their health? Are they reeling from stress or depression?

Step 2: Execute the action planning sheet from the toolkit to help you plan and structure your approach.

Using the service planning sheet from this toolkit on holding a wellbeing conversation to help you plan and structure your approach.

It gives some great starters for ten open questions to help you move the discussion forward.

Using that in partnership with the pressure checklist provides the basis for you really understanding what is creating pressure for your team member.

Holding the conversation

Use the worksheet from this toolkit on holding and managing a wellbeing conversation to help you plan and structure your approach.

It gives some great starters for ten open questions to help you move the discussion forward.

Using that in partnership with the pressure checklist provides the basis for you really understanding what is creating pressure for your team member.
Support versus challenge

As a manager you can provide either challenge or support to your team members. To instill positive wellbeing in your team members must experience some positive pressure. However, if you or the environment creates too much pressure, this can lead to burnout, while if you buffer things and support them too much, you can create a situation of rust out.

In this conversation as you agree options for moving forward, think about how the terms you agree with the team member allow them to be challenged enough to thrive, without being so challenged they return to a position of feeling overwhelmed or stressed.

Creating and delivering on a wellbeing passport

To support management of your team member's wellbeing moving forward, the creation of a formal agreement on how you will support them and what they will do to actively manage their pressures and reaction to these is a helpful way to formalise the support you'll be expected to provide.

It also forms the basis for further check-in conversations and evaluation of how they are coping with the pressure they face.

- Use the conversation between you to identify and understand what the factors impacting their wellbeing are
- Agree what can be influenced by you or by your team member to change their experience of work
- Explore solutions and ways to do this
- Agree who is responsible for putting the solutions into place
- Use the conversation to complete the action plan and agree next steps and responsibilities in a structured way.