



Prioritizing Mental Health
in First Responders

Get the Conversation Started

FIRST RESPONDERS TOOLKIT RESOURCES

Talking about mental health in the workplace is not always easy. Normalizing these conversations is one of the most important things you can do as a manager or supervisor of a team of first responders. Encouraging ongoing, open dialogue demonstrates that you are there for your team and that you care. Don't wait until your employee is off from work recovering from a psychological injury. Be proactive and get the conversation started early. This document will provide tips on how to foster a supportive work environment, build a foundation of trust, and keep the lines of communication open.

Setting up a supportive work environment

Creating a supportive work environment starts with you. When you're approachable and genuinely care, your employees will be more likely to open up. Set up regular one-on-one meetings with your team. During these meetings, ask workers how they're doing. Over time, workers will feel comfortable sharing concerns before they become a mental health challenge or psychological injury.

Before the meeting

- Ensure you have enough time to talk.
- Ensure you're in the right frame of mind to listen.
- Choose a place to chat that's informal, private, and safe.
- Prepare yourself for an uncomfortable or emotional conversation.

During the meeting

- Offer supportive communication through active and reflective listening.
- Provide positive feedback and reinforce your worker's importance to the team.
- If needed, share any support your organization offers, like an employee assistance program.

There may be times when an employee is unable to remain at work due to a psychological injury. Because you've established a foundation of trust and support, assisting your injured worker with their recovery and return to work will be even easier.

What to do

When a worker is experiencing a psychological injury?

Whether your employee is recovering from a psychological injury at work or home, you can actively support their return to work. Here are four steps with tips on how to guide those conversations.

Step 1: Ask

Ensure you are relaxed and have dedicated enough time to make it a meaningful conversation. Find a quiet, safe, and private place to meet with your employee or speak with them over the phone.

“Are you okay?”

“Is this a good time to talk?”

“I know you’re going through something tough right now. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Talking about what you’re experiencing isn’t easy, but it can help. I’m here to listen.”

Step 2: Listen

Now it's your employee's turn to talk. Take what they say seriously and sit patiently in silence if they need time to think. Don't rush, interrupt, or try to "fill in the blanks." Avoid making the conversation about you and your experiences. You are there to listen and support. If they get angry or upset, that's okay. Stay calm, and don't take it personally.

"I understand you're upset. I'm asking because I'm concerned and want to help."

"Are you able to elaborate on that? I want to understand as best as I can."

"Take as long as you need. I'm here when you're ready."

"I genuinely care about you, and my job is to listen to what you need."

"You have every right to be angry. Let it out."

Step 3: Encourage action

Once you understand what's going on, you can make a plan together to take action. Make it clear your employee has your full support on their road to recovery.

“How can I help?”

“What would be a good next step? Can we take it together?”

“What do you need from me to support your return to work?”

“Are there alternate duties that you feel would be easier for you?”

“Thank you for sharing. Let's make a plan on how to move forward.”

Step 4: Check In

Plan to check in on how your employees are doing and share helpful resources regularly. This will demonstrate that they have your genuine, ongoing support. Don't judge or criticize if no progress has been made. Stay optimistic.

“Checking in to see how things are going. Are the steps we discussed working?”

“How are things going?”

“If the action plan isn't working, there's always another way. Let's try something different.”

“Glad to hear you're making progress. Great job.”

“If it's okay with you, I'd like to keep checking in on a regular basis.”

“I found this resource helpful, let me share it with you.”

Step 5: Prepare

Prepare employees to support a psychologically safe workplace.

When someone returns to work after psychological injury, their colleagues may be afraid that something they say or do could be harmful. Help them understand how they can create a psychologically safe, supportive and welcoming work environment by:

- Becoming more aware of psychological safety at work
- Being supportive and compassionate
- Practicing active listening, and making it OK to talk about wellness at work

This First Responders Tool Kit also includes a Guide for Managers and Supervisors and Peer-to-Peer Support Programs sections. Both are very helpful resources for promoting workplace psychological health and for determining what to do when a team member becomes injured.