



Tutorial 2: How to support someone with compromised mental health

Lesson 1: How will I know if someone needs support?

Compromised mental health can occur in both people with a mental illness and those without, and it is normal to experience compromised mental health at various stages throughout life. It is important to support anyone experiencing compromised mental health regardless of whether or not they have a diagnosed mental illness. People with compromised mental health can often feel alone and isolated from others. They may feel embarrassed or be uncomfortable talking about their thoughts and feelings, even with their family and friends.

Emotional and practical support from family, friends and others is one of the strongest ways we can help someone experiencing compromised mental health. You can help by supporting them to start taking steps to feel better, by listening with care, asking questions and being sensitive to their feelings. Noticing that something is not quite right with a friend or family member can be difficult. It is important to trust your gut – if you do notice changes in someone’s behaviour or emotions, be careful not to ignore your concerns. You may be the only person to notice these changes, so it is important to take action.

How can you tell if something is wrong?

- Listen to show care – sometimes people will simply tell you they’re feeling down or struggling to cope. Avoid judging or brushing off people when they say they’re not coping. Be a good listener.
- Watch for changes – look out for changes in a person’s behaviour. Look for signs they are doing things that are out of character or changes in their usual behaviour. Be alert to changes in a routine or when they stop activities they usually find enjoyable
- Be sensitive to emotions – people with depression and anxiety may express their difficulties differently, but often through emotions. They can seem angry or sad, or even erratic and swing between moods. Try not to jump to conclusions and judge them.

Lesson 2: How can I talk to someone who needs support?

We all want to help people who need support; however, it may feel daunting to start a conversation with them. It’s understandable that people are afraid or uncertain of how to talk to someone who may be experiencing compromised mental health and/or mental illness for fear they may make it worse. In



reality, this is rarely the case. In fact, the very best course of action is to talk with the person you are concerned about.

People with compromised mental health want to know that someone is there for them and has some kind of understanding of what they are going through. It's the simple everyday conversations about how someone is feeling that can make a real difference and make someone feel a sense of hope that things can improve. Knowing someone cares, is really important.

Follow these four steps to check in with someone

To facilitate a care conversation, you can use RUOK's four steps:

- 1) **Ask** – ask them if they're OK. Ensure that you remain relaxed whilst doing so, and use open ended questions to help them open up. Questions can include "How are you going?" or "What's been happening?"
- 2) **Listen** – listen to what they say. Give them time to speak or think, take what they say seriously, and ensure you remain calm if they do become upset or angry
- 3) **Encourage action** – this may involve helping them brainstorm where they can go from here. There are many sources that can provide support, including their workplace employee assistance program (EAP), a trusted family member or a friend, their GP, or a community support organisation such as Lifeline or Beyond Blue
- 4) **Check-in** – ensure you check back in with them after a few days to see how they are and whether they have actioned what you spoke about. It is important to note that seeking help can take time, so be patient, and keep encouraging them if they haven't done anything yet

Time to talk

Here's a few conversations starters to help you take the first step to talk with:

- "I can see you're having a hard time. Do you want to talk about it?" – this validates their feelings and lets them know you care
- "I don't know how you're feeling, but I'm here to listen if you want to talk" – this recognises you don't know what it feels like but you're willing to listen and learn
- "I know it doesn't feel like it now, but things can get better." – this encourages hope for a better future without promising to fix the problem
- "Have you talked to your GP about how you feel? There's lots of things they can do to help now" – this highlights the importance of seeking professional help



- “Do you feel like doing something together?” – sometimes it’s best not to talk about their feelings all the time and take the focus away to other interests and activities
- “Tell me what happened yesterday when you had a bad day” – this grounds the conversation in facts

A few simple tips:

- Don’t be afraid to just be straight – “Tell me how you’re feeling?”
- Share something of yourself so the conversation feels equal
- Validate what they’re experiencing without judgement
- Let them know there is professional help available
- Remind them that mental illness is an illness and it can be treated
- Offer to support and listen
- Ask them what help and support they may need – but know its ok if they are unable to articulate what this may be

What to avoid:

- Giving simple ‘fixes’ like “Just get out more” or “go to the shops, you’ll feel better”
- Judging them or ‘telling’ – sometimes we don’t need advice, we just want to be heard
- Asking ‘why?’

Helpful messages

Remember, being well (flourishing) and experiencing a mental illness for many people is possible. There are many little actions that can help people with compromised mental health to feel better.

Simple messages about how to boost our sense of wellbeing can lead to a renewed focus of energy and hope, simply by reminding them of the good things in life and what it means to be well. A few tips of encouragement are:

- Get enough sleep
- Eat healthy foods
- Get some exercise
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol



- Keep up personal interests and hobbies
- Stay connected with family and friends

Be careful not to sound judgmental or preachy. You're just being a good friend. You may like to offer to support them implementing these activities – such as going for a walk together regularly.

Video Testimonials

Bec's Story: <https://youtu.be/yvGWdX8TI-E>

Justine's Story: <https://youtu.be/EfS7A5y6UYQ>

Resources

- How to have a care conversation – RUOK? Access via <https://www.ruok.org.au/how-to-ask>
- Conversation starters – RUOK? Access via <https://www.ruok.org.au/conversation-starters>