

COMPASSIONATE CONVERSATIONS AT WORK

LET'S TALK MENTAL HEALTH
A HOW TO **ACTION** GUIDE FOR CEOs,
LEADERS AND LINE MANAGERS

BY DR ELAINE SMITH



'Improving life at work
isn't rocket science, but
the world is closer to
colonizing Mars than it is
to fixing the world's
broken workplaces'

Jon Clifton, Gallup CEO

MEETING MENTAL HEALTH
DISCLOSURE WITH COMPOSURE



What is compassion?

First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore that homeless person on the street, you can't feel compassion for how difficult his or her experience is.

Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others' suffering so that your heart responds to their pain (the word compassion literally means to "suffer with"). When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly.

Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity), it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience. "There but for fortune go I."

Kristin Neff

The chronic anxiety that comes from working through one global crisis after another is wearing on employees. Being overwhelmed consumes human energy and impacts retention, performance, innovation, and culture.

Employers can be the anchor of stability for their people by giving them the support and resources they need — not just what we think they need.

— Dr. Jarik Conrad, SPHR,
SHRM-SCP Executive Director of
The Workforce Institute at UKG

Line managers have a **wonderful** opportunity to make a positive impact.



DID YOU KNOW?

Managers have just as much of an impact on people's mental health as their spouse (both 69%) — and even more of an impact than their doctor (51%) or therapist (41%).

Introduction

COMPASSIONATE CONVERSATIONS



This guide is designed to help line managers to feel more confident when supporting employees who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

Both anecdotal and research evidence suggests that many line managers do not feel confident about this part of their role.

We are going to address the common anxieties around discussing mental health that can impact on the very important relationship between line manager and employee.

- Only 38% of line managers feel confident discussing mental health
- Only 29% line managers feel confident they can spot warning signs of poor mental health

CIPD Report 2022 - Health & Wellbeing at Work

See the Change

GUIDED BY THE 'WHY'

Grounding ourselves in context and research, to gain clarity and take action.

MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK FACTS

- 60% of UK workforce state their job is negatively impacting their mental health (Workforce Institute UKG)
- 19% of people feel miserable at work (Gallup State of Global Workplace 2022 Report)
- 44% of workforce feel stressed at work - an all time high
- Only 9% of UK workforce are engaged at work
- Workload accounts for 73% of work related stress (Champion Health Report 2022)
- Other top causes of negative stress at work include lack of control, lack of support, senior staff and peers

MORAL & LEGAL DRIVERS

MORAL

- What values and beliefs that drive you to help and support employees?
- What are the values of your organisation, and the vision for employee wellbeing?
- If you know a fellow human is suffering, what feels like the right thing to do?

LEGAL

- 'The Equality Act 2010 is the law that protects you from discrimination and gives you the right to challenge it. You are protected by the Equality Act if you have certain protected characteristics, like a mental health problem' (Mind.org.uk)
- Employers have a duty of care, and it is very important that line managers are clear on their role, and the legislation. Here is a useful link - <https://www.acas.org.uk/supporting-mental-health-workplace>

Being the Change

Mental health and wellbeing at work is **not a tick box** exercise.

It is a **human response** to human needs.

Our ability to **listen** to the experiences of others is our most powerful intervention.

In the words of The Dalai Lama,

“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.”

Being the Change

ACKNOWLEDGING OUR FEARS AND ANXIETIES

We know that line managers often lack confidence in initiating conversations around mental health.

The research highlights that this is likely because of beliefs, fears and anxieties that are held about discussing mental health. We all come with our own stories and experiences that shape our beliefs and consequently our behaviours.

The great news is that when we identify what is holding us back, we can learn to understand it and let it guide us.

Take a moment to reflect and think about any barriers you encounter around compassionate mental health conversations:

My Beliefs:

My Fears/anxieties:

My Experiences:

Being the Change

REFLECTIONS ON THE 'WHY'

What are the steps you can take **now** to enhance your knowledge and confidence regarding mental health at work? Consider any gaps in your knowledge, areas of interest and the specific needs of your team/industry.

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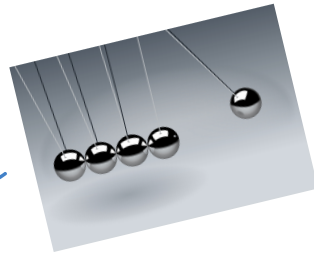
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Making the Change



TAKING ACTION

You, as line manager, can literally be the 'change that makes a change'. We can have all the best policies and training in the world - but, only action leads to meaningful change.

Doable action in 3 easy steps:

1. Ask
2. Listen
3. Identify and Implement

Let's Go

Making the Change

ASK

Using proactive strategies to make cultural changes, one conversation at a time

1

Think about ways you could start conversations around mental health. We know that 'not knowing what to say' is a common stumbling block. Here are some very simple conversation starters:

- Is there anything I can support you with?
- How are you feeling?
- I am always here if you need to talk about any stressors
- Sharing your own experiences is also extremely powerful, if you feel comfortable in doing so.


2

If you do not already, begin to embed mental health and wellbeing conversations into your workplace ROUTINELY. Use your creativity and list what meetings, daily conversations and opportunities there are to check in on mental health, and general well-being. Choose one from your list and start NOW.

3

If you are concerned about an employee's mental health, I have one piece of advice - ASK THEM.

Most importantly, create a safe environment and invite them to chat. Some people prefer to communicate by email, or phone - (so you can also start asking this routinely in 1:1 meetings) so that we know how people want to be cared for when things are tough. We do not need to guess or wait for a crisis.



“Listen with curiosity. Speak with honesty. Act with integrity. The greatest problem with communication is we don’t listen to understand. We listen to reply. When we listen with curiosity, we don’t listen with the intent to reply. We listen for what’s behind the words.”

— Roy T. Bennett



Making the Change

LISTEN

"I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening." — Larry King, CNN

1

Asking and observing is, of course, extremely important - but listening is the **most powerful tool we have.**

Real, active listening allows us to feel heard, understood, valued, respected and it helps us to bond.

When we try to share something important to us, and we feel dismissed or ignored, it can damage relationships and our self-esteem.

By really paying attention, and really listening, your employees will feel valued and everyone is a winner.

2

Resist every temptation you have to 'fix' the problem, or come up with solutions. Focus on what the person is saying and offer them your undivided attention. This is the 'golden opportunity'. A moment where feeling vulnerable can help us to bond and build trust in others, or to retreat and want to hide away if we are not met with empathy.

3

Take the pressure off thinking about your response. Even when people share with us the most difficult experiences, it is OKAY to not know what to say. We can literally say 'I don't know what to say' - So long as we are with the person in that moment. When we feel true empathy, we imagine and sometimes feel part of their pain. This can render us speechless or shocked. We are human. An empathic response is the key. A genuine human to human moment.

Grab a cuppa



A 'MUST

Brenè Brown is a master of vulnerability and shame conversations. She is a social worker by profession, then became an academic researcher before a viral Ted Talk took her onto the world stage. I recommend that you watch these videos to help you feel more confident in talking about mental health.





Empathy Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

The Vulnerability Ted Talk

[https://www.youtube.com/results?](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=brene+brown+vulnerability+ted+talk)

[search_query=brene+brown+vulnerability+ted+talk](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=brene+brown+vulnerability+ted+talk)



“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

— *Leo Buscaglia*



Making the Change

IDENTIFY & IMPLEMENT

Now to take action. Use the information you have, add a sprinkle of compassion and humanity to create change in the most meaningful way - human to human.

Identify

Collate all the information you have gathered about the individual's needs so far. You will (hopefully) have gathered this information from empathic conversations as above. The resources below are also recommended as a means of gathering information about stress and wellbeing at work.

The Wellness Action Plan (WAP) is completed on an individual basis.

https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5760/mind-guide-for-employees-wellness-action-plans_final.pdf

The Stress Risk Assessment refers to your workplace, but can also be helpful in determining stressors in the workplace that may apply to any of your employees. Individuals may also highlight workplace stressors that are not already included in your stress risk assessment (which you can update at any time).

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm>

List all the needs of the individual. Check it with them. Be transparent. Clarify anything you are unsure about.

Always checking in, and always appreciating that people will share what they wish to share in their own time. When they feel safe and they can trust you as their line manager or leader.



Making the Change

IDENTIFY & IMPLEMENT

Below are some ideas to consider when implementing change around mental health at work. This list is not exhaustive but it is a starting point.

The key is in taking action. Policies and documents mean nothing without action. Be clear on *why* you are choosing each action - why is it beneficial?

Implement

- Reasonable adjustments
- Plan more regular 1:1s
- Change the environment - light/sound/seating/location etc
- Engage in more line manager training regarding mental health
- Ask for feedback about how work meetings impact - a common source of stress
- Be open - share your own experiences (as appropriate and if you feel able to)
- Plan an away day/team building event - but ask your team what they want!
- Encourage and model taking regular breaks
- Human Resources
- Occupational Health
- Be proactive about wellbeing - workload **always** appears as number 1 in workplace wellbeing literature. Less is *always* more = Increased productivity and overall wellbeing
- Complete the WAP plan - and IMPLEMENT the strategies or it is simply a document
- Complete the Stress Risk Assessment - ask your team and develop insight. You will be streets ahead

What is Your Next Step?

If this workbook has got you curious, or has peaked your interest in mental health at work - excellent!

For every leader and line manager who wants to learn, and more importantly implement the strategies, the impact you can have on both the individual and your business is incredible.

This workbook is my foundational level, and designed to engage leaders, and build confidence in having compassionate conversations.

Of course, we all come with our different stories, so some people feel they would like further support to have compassionate conversations around mental health.

The good news is, you can book in with me for a virtual one hour session at the Compassionate Conversations Cafe.

We can explore your experiences of having conversations around mental health with your employees, and I can make recommendations about how to navigate this part of your role.

It is your opportunity to speak openly in a confidential space with a highly trained mental health professional.

This is not therapy, but a one-off consultation to support you in supporting others.

Contact drelainessmith@protonmail.com to book an appointment.

About THE AUTHOR



Dr Elaine Smith is a Clinical Psychologist and Business Wellbeing Consultant. She specialises in workplace mental health and wellbeing. Elaine has specific interests in Psychological Safety and Work-Related Stress. She has a range of digital products available to corporate organisations, big and small.

She wants to create healthier and happier workplaces - by inspiring committed action. Making real changes, for motivated and productive workplaces - where people WANT to work.

Please do not hesitate to contact for further information. Details are below.

FOR FURTHER
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