



Mental Health Support
for First Responders

Helping Troubled Co-workers

By Mary Ann Baynton

Many forward-looking employers, in response to an emerging legal duty to provide and maintain a psychologically safe workplace, are establishing policies and procedures that promote a mentally healthy work environment. However, recognizing and responding to individuals whose mental health may be at risk is often left to supervisors and co-workers by default. How can they be supported to do this?

In my role as a workplace mental health consultant, I am often asked a question such as this:

I have a co-worker who seems increasingly unsettled each day. Often, he looks tired and upset, as well as distracted. When I asked, the manager said that he is still getting his work done so it's not a problem. I am worried and wonder what I should say or do?

The manager is saying that it is not currently a performance problem, but a worker may be right to have concerns for the well-being of a co-worker. While there could be any number of explanations for the change in his condition, early intervention can reduce the chances that his current problem will become chronic or escalate.

Like all health problems, it is not the responsibility of co-workers to deal with these issues. However, if you are someone who wants to reach out or support another, know that each situation comes with unique elements. What follows are some possible options for you to consider where the circumstances are appropriate.

1. Exploring the situation

- Tell your co-worker that he does not seem to be himself lately, and specifically state what you see. “You don’t look as well as you usually do. You seem upset and distracted. Are you feeling okay?”
- Resist making any judgments or conclusions about what is going on. Instead, invite your coworker to talk about what he is experiencing. When he is done, repeat what you heard and ask him if that is correct.
- Resist giving him advice about what to do. Instead, continue to listen and ask what you can do to help. There are two reasons for this approach. The first is that you avoid giving the wrong advice or unwanted advice – both of which could have unintended consequences. The second is that you are able to help your co-worker focus on what it is he needs. When any of us are consumed by negative or fearful thoughts, we can lose sight of what we need to move beyond them.

2. Encouraging action – when your co-worker is ready for change

- Try to help your co-worker preserve workplace relationships and his reputation at work. This can include helping him to avoid unnecessary conflict or acting out when he is not well.
- Encourage your co-worker to take the work breaks that are provided to go for a walk, or out for fresh air. These changes in focus and physical movement can ultimately help him to increase concentration at work. Source: Mary Ann Baynton. Resolving Workplace Issues, 2011.
- Help your co-worker focus on one small step forward at a time. Trying to “fix” everything at once can be overwhelming.
- If your co-worker is overwhelmed with work, encourage him to write down all of the tasks that he is currently doing and if this seems overwhelming to him, consider offering to help complete the list. Encourage him to take the list to his manager to help him prioritize those tasks that are most important.
- Help your co-worker to focus on solutions rather than problems. If he is worried or upset about something or someone, ask what he would like to do about that, and if he is unsure, offer some ideas, but make sure he chooses his own path forward. If your co-worker is having trouble at work, look at the list of accommodation ideas on the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace website (www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com), and see if the suggestions for helping with concentration, stamina, workplace relationships, etc. may be useful.

3. Seeking additional support

- Look through your benefits plan to see if there are any services that may be helpful such as acupuncture, massage therapy, psychological services, etc.
- Suggest your co-worker speak to a healthcare professional – such as an employee health resource or his family physician.
- Based on what he says he is experiencing, look up resources in the community, online, and at the workplace. Share these with him and ask if he needs anything further.
- If your co-worker is not sure what he is experiencing, have him look at Working Through It. (www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/wti) to see if any of the approaches or situations described there are helpful.
- If your co-worker is concerned that it may be more than stress, have him take the Check Up From the Neck Up quiz online (www.checkupfromtheneckup.ca) and take the results to his family doctor.
- If your co-worker is having personal or financial issues, direct him to your Employee Assistance Program, or other community resources that help with these situations.

4. Looking after yourself at the same time

- Remember that you are not a therapist. Refer instead to appropriate resources and just continue to be a concerned co-worker who is there for support. Do not allow your days to become filled up with discussion about problems. Help your co-worker to focus on solutions for the workplace issues.
- It is honourable that you want to help your co-worker. Remember, however, to protect your own health and well-being at the same time.

Source: Mary Ann Baynton. Resolving Workplace Issues, 2011.