



HOW TO SPOT SOMEONE IN DISTRESS

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How to spot someone in distress

What does someone in distress look like? What should you do? How can you start a conversation?

Have you noticed a change in a loved one or friend? It's important to pay attention to cues that someone might be struggling, and reach out. You may notice they are:

- Displaying a lack of interest in things they would normally enjoy or be involved in
- Abrupt changes in tone, volume or mood
- Long pauses between speaking
- Withdrawal
- Poor concentration
- Rigid and inflexible attitude
- Overreaction to minor things
- High or exaggerated emotions – teary, angry, anxious, fearful, sad

If you know the person already then often you will have thought that something is not right. A change in behaviour, especially if it includes one or many of the above signs, can be a sign of a mental health issue or a mental illness.

What to do and what not to do

The most thing is to do or say *something*. If someone is showing some of the signs mentioned above, or they disclose the problems to you, it is most important that you take their concerns seriously and are considerate about their situation.

Here are some best practice recommendations and strategies to effectively approach someone showing signs of distress:

– What to do ()

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| Talk | Talk to the person about how they're feeling, within boundaries with which you are both comfortable. Open the dialogue and provide an avenue for further discussion. |
| Listen | Actively listen to what they're saying – give them your full attention and don't think you have to be ready to give advice. Often it's the case that the person will just want to talk about their concerns and they are not actually seeking advice. You may like to save any suggestions for later in the discussion, when the person is ready. |
| Empathise | It's important that the person feels heard. Typically, they will not move on until they feel like you understand. Reflecting with empathy and conveying that you are here to help them will help to develop this rapport. |
| Open Questions | Use open-ended questions to draw the person into responding with more than just a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Questions like 'So tell me about...?' are often a good way to start a conversation. Avoid judgment. |

Encourage, and even assist, the person to seek help or access appropriate resources for support. Think practically

Encourage help / support

about how you might approach this with the staff member, as you may not know what services are available to them. Ask if they can see a GP or encourage them to access your workplace's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if your workplace has one. Where the person may be in financial difficulty, let them know there is also the option of getting counselling through the Medicare scheme or seeking financial support through other means. Individuals are able to receive up to 10 sessions of rebated counselling a year with a qualified professional free of charge; individuals need to see their GP who will provide a referral to a nearby counsellor available on the Medicare scheme.

Take your time

Just taking the time to talk through the issues or feelings with the person can let them know you care. It can also help you gain clarity on their situation and understand what they're going through. Trying to rush through conversations or find solutions to quickly resolve the situation may not help them in the long run.

Manage your emotions

A person experiencing mental health concerns often feels very isolated so don't feel discouraged if they seem withdrawn. Likewise, don't take it personally if your conversation becomes difficult or the person you're talking to becomes agitated or angry at the organisation, the world, or you. Remain calm but firm and keep consistent; don't lose emotional control.

Look after yourself

How can you look after someone if you are not well yourself? Assisting and supporting someone can be incredibly demanding and draining, so make sure you take time out to take care of yourself.

These are general guidelines in order for you to feel more confident in effectively managing situations involving concerns for a person's mental health. However, the appropriate action always depends on the situation. Simply doing nothing, however, is not ever recommended.

The reason that many people fail to take action is because of the 'fear factor' – they think that by doing something they will make the situation worse.

+ What not to do ()

Is it time to have a conversation with someone you care about?

Here are a few tips and strategies can help prepare you for these conversations:

The art of checking in (<https://www.superfriend.com.au/news/mental-health-checkin/>)

How to ask R U OK? (<https://www.ruok.org.au/how-to-ask>)

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