



# How to Support a Co-worker Experiencing Mental Health Issues

Public Safety Personnel (PSP) can experience extremely high levels of job-related stress. Their exposures to job-related stressors can increase their risk for developing mental health symptoms associated with generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

**Many PSP feel alone when facing mental health challenges and concerns about stigma can prevent PSP from reaching out for support. Social support can be an important part of protecting PSP from the harmful effects of stress. Co-workers are often among the first to notice symptoms of poor mental health in PSP, and because of a shared occupation, PSP may be more likely to open up to a peer.**



## What signs should I look for?

The following signs can be concerning when occurring regularly

- Withdrawal from the group
- Regular low mood, frequent pessimistic comments
- Many or various physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach problems, fatigue)
- Difficulties concentrating and thinking
- Increased irritability
- Reports of lost sleep, too much sleep, or fatigue
- Changes in personal hygiene, particularly reductions in hygiene
- Suicidal thoughts, comments, or behaviours
- Reports of worrying
- Difficulties relaxing
- Increased sensitivity to stimuli (e.g., light, odours, sounds)
- Lack of interest in work, colleagues, or pleasant activities outside of work
- Suspicion or paranoia
- Abnormal or unusual behaviour
- Reports of low or increased appetite
- Sudden or radical changes in mood
- Substance abuse

## How can I offer support?

- Remind your co-worker that talking about mental health can be helpful
- Try to listen without trying to “fix” something
- Try to empathize with how your co-worker feels, without judging, even when their feelings are hard to understand
- Ask how you can help
- Remind your co-worker that you are there for them
- Learn more about mental health and the resources available in your organization, and help your co-worker to also be aware of the available resources
- Remind co-workers that they can seek help with their mental health
- Reach out to co-workers to include them in activities
- Remember to take care of yourself



## How can I talk to my co-workers about mental health?

Talking about mental health can be challenging. When you do start a discussion with a co-worker about mental health, remember to be open and non-judgemental. When you decide to talk to a co-worker about mental health, also remember the following:

- Make yourself available and open to mental health conversations
- Be sure to listen closely without interrupting
- Ask open-ended questions to allow your co-worker to share how they feel
- Pay attention to your body language; you say a lot without words



## How do I talk about suicidal thoughts and feelings?

Talking about suicide does **NOT** make people more likely to attempt suicide. Asking someone directly about whether they are thinking about suicide opens the door to a potentially life-saving conversation.

## What if they say “yes” when I ask if they have thoughts of suicide?

If someone you know is talking about suicide and you have questions, you can always contact:

**Crisis Services Canada (1-833-456-4566)**

**or Centre de prévention du Suicide de Québec (1-866-277-3553)**

Both are available 24/7 and offer confidential support to yourself, as the support person, and to your co-worker who is struggling with suicidal thoughts. If they acknowledge that they are feeling suicidal and you feel they are a risk to themselves, it is important to reach out for help for that colleague and remain with them until support can be arranged.



## Know your own limits

Reaching out to a struggling co-worker is not always easy. You need to be mindful of your own capacity to provide support. Your co-worker may very well need more support than you can provide. It's good to know about your agency's employee and family assistance program (EFAP), or if there is a CISM or peer support program in your organization.

Also, please do consider recommending PSPNET as a resource. PSPNET offers free internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy, also known as ICBT, specifically tailored for current and former Public Safety Personnel (PSP) <https://www.pspnet.ca/term/public-safety-personnel-ppsp>, and their spouses or significant others.

Getting more help before you are overwhelmed is often important. If you have reached your own limits, be ready to guide your co-worker to other supports for their mental health needs. The most important thing is to show compassion and empathy for your co-worker.

