

Talking to members about mental health



Union members may open up to you about their mental illnesses or mental health problems. But it's important to remember that not everyone feels comfortable sharing this information. They may be afraid of being judged or concerned about how it could affect their job. In some cases, individuals may not even be aware that they are experiencing mental health issues.

Unions and mental health

The duty of fair representation requires care. Treating the member like everyone else is not enough. If we know or suspect that a member has a medical condition affecting their situation at work, the union needs to address it. This includes mental health problems.

This means we need to ask the member about their mental health in a confidential and trustworthy manner.

Regardless of the reason for the conversation, approach it neutrally:

- Let the member know you're there to listen and help with a solution at work.
- Inform them of their right to be accommodated in the case of a disability related to a medical condition, including those relating to mental health.
- Remember, there may be more going on than what is on the surface. Racism, ableism, gender discrimination, economic insecurity and other factors can affect mental health.

Choose your words thoughtfully:

- It's not about you. It's about them and what they're struggling with. This is not the time to discuss political or religious views or right or wrong.
- Don't use offensive terms related to mental health to describe yourself or others.
- Avoid labelling someone solely by their illness. People are more than their diagnosis.
- Be mindful of your word choices. Use accurate and sensitive language when talking about people, especially if they may be experiencing mental health problems.

Be aware of the impact:

- Having difficult conversations can have a significant impact on you that you shouldn't ignore. Practice self-care by doing something that helps you take some pressure off at the first reasonable opportunity. This will help manage the impact.
- The person you are speaking to may be thinking of suicide. If you think that's the case, please reach out to supports. There are crisis telephone lines readily available.
- It's better to reach out to supports with the member's consent, unless you believe there is a risk of self-inflicted harm. In this case, you should tell them that you are calling, but consent is not required.

Intersectionality

Members of equity-deserving groups may have additional stressors to deal with, like violence or discrimination based on race, culture, origin, ability, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation. Intergenerational trauma, like from colonization or racism, can cause mistrust of the health care or security systems we typically count on for help. Any action proposed must be respectful and inclusive.

Medical privacy and confidentiality

If you are aware that or believe that a member may have a mental health problem, the union needs to represent them properly. In these situations, our duty of fair representation means applying an extra duty of care.

This means we must ask the member if there is something going on, if they've been feeling well lately or if they need additional support. We need to do this in a way that builds trust, which means respecting high standards of confidentiality.

Meeting tips

Before doing anything, remember that consent from the member should always be your first consideration.

Reflect on the best person to have the conversation:

- Understand that the member may not agree to talk with you.
- Assess your relationship with the member.
 - Are there trust issues or power dynamics involved?
 - Are there other stewards or executive members with a closer relationship to the member?

Check your own mental health state:

- Are you emotionally available?
- Do you have time to listen?

Consider privacy and confidentiality:

- Determine who needs to know what and when.
- Get permission from the member to speak confidentially with someone who can provide support, such as the local president, a chief steward or national representative. Remember, every local is different.
- Share information on a need-to-know basis with consent from the member.

Let the member know:

- They can bring someone for emotional support to the meeting if they want.
- Sharing their health information can prevent discipline and ensure workplace accommodations if needed.
- They have a right to reasonable privacy.
- The employer isn't automatically entitled to detailed information or diagnosis.
- The union will protect the member's privacy as much as possible.
- In complex situations, more information may need to be shared, but only with the member's consent.
- It may require multiple conversations to address everything.

After the conversation, follow up on any solutions you discussed. Regardless of how it goes, check in with the member later.

And remember—look after yourself. Whatever the outcome, remember that the situation is not your fault. Individuals are responsible for their own experiences and behaviour. As trade unionists, we are there to work with members as best we can to protect their rights in the workplace, not to control their behaviour or to provide medical care.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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