



TIP SHEET

How to have a supportive conversation

Engaging in genuine, empathetic conversations is a cornerstone of providing positive mental health and wellbeing support

Developed by [Flowstate Margaret River Inc.](#)

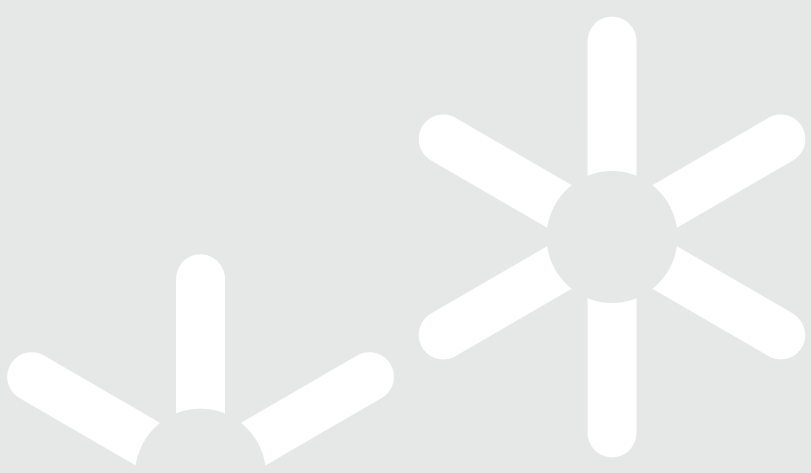
Club members can demonstrate their concern and willingness to help by proactively checking in with someone who they are worried about.

Sometimes, just knowing someone cares can be a huge help. Expressing concern, active listening, and sharing information on support services and resources can be an invaluable starting point for someone to seek support.

This how to have a supportive conversation tip sheet is designed to provide you with practical tools to have a supportive conversation with someone in need.

Your role is to listen, validate and then direct people to professional support. Your role is not to try and solve the issue or provide mental health advice.

Note: This resource is designed to help direct people to professional support and help if needed. If for any reason you have an immediate concern for someone's health and safety, such as due to a disclosure that self-harm or suicide is planned, call triple zero (000).



The Stress Bucket

An analogy that helps us to understand how we cope with, and respond to, stress.

Imagine everyone has their own bucket. The size of our bucket indicates the amount of stress we can take on. Everyone's bucket is different, meaning everyone's capacity to cope with stress is different.

There are many things in our past that can affect our current capacity to cope with stress. Things like:

- Trauma and loss
- How we've learned to cope with stress
- The ways in which we interpret events or stress
- Family history of mental illness
- Growing up in poverty
- Bullying in our childhood
- Not having consistent accommodation or care in our childhood.

Now imagine that there is water filling the bucket. The water represents stressors in our everyday life.



Lots of things can add water to our bucket, such as:

- Relationships
- Work or study
- Money
- Too much or too little to do
- Life admin
- Being unable to be yourself
- Major life changes
- Physical illness

As stress from everyday life flows into the bucket it begins to fill, and can we start to feel more stressed. This is when people start to notice changes in their mood (irritable, moody, anxious, sad) as well as in their performance (having trouble concentrating or forgetting more than usual, having trouble sleeping, or feeling more tired than usual).

At this point we are usually able to keep going with our daily tasks (like work or study, sports or hobbies and maintain our relationships with our partner, children and friends) but we're not feeling quite right.

If the bucket overflows, it means that our threshold for stress has been reached and this is when we feel like we can't cope anymore. This is normally the point where most people ask for help, but if we can educate ourselves to know when things are starting to get stressful, we can start to make changes so that our buckets don't overflow.

Reducing stress with coping strategies

By using healthy coping strategies we all have the power to reduce the amount of stress in our bucket and stop it from overflowing.

These are like taps on the side of our bucket that we can turn on to let the water flow out. Some taps are towards the bottom of our bucket, and we use them all the time. These are coping strategies like exercise or getting good sleep. They help to stop the water from getting too high on a regular basis.

Other taps are closer to the top of our buckets, and we only need to use them when things are really stressful. These are things like taking medication, talking to a professional, taking time off or setting extra boundaries.

It's important to have a range of coping strategies that we can use at different times.

If you're feeling like your bucket could use a few extra taps (or you'd like to make your existing taps a bit more effective), start by looking at the [Headspace Stress Bucket activities](#).



Having supportive conversations

NIP - Notice, Inquire and Provide.

A helpful acronym to remember what to do when you want to talk to someone about their mental health.

[NIP was developed by Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation.](#)

Notice

You may notice changes in someone at your club when they are having a tough time. When we're having a tough time with our mental health there is seldom only one sign.

Things to look out for are:

- A noticeable change in how they are feeling and thinking.
- Feelings like anger, sadness, fear, not caring about anything, risk taking.
- You might see changes in the way someone is behaving or acting.
- Not enjoying things anymore.
- Changes in eating or sleeping.
- Being easily irritated or having problems with friends and family.
- Finding they can't focus on things or maintain attention.
- Feeling down or that there is no hope or point to life.
- Having trouble concentrating or remembering things.
- Turning to alcohol or drugs to cope with feelings.
- Having negative thoughts or distressing thoughts.
- Feeling unusually stressed or worried.
- Changes socially like withdrawal, being secretive, acting out of character.

Try not to diagnose the person, only a doctor can do that. Your job is to find out more and see how you can support them to improve their mental health or to get the right help.

Inquire

The aim of any supportive conversation, as the name suggests, is an opportunity for a person to share how they feel, to feel heard and to feel supported.

You are never being expected to replace counselling or other professional mental health services.

It can be daunting to have a conversation with someone about their mental health. Here are some techniques to try to make the conversation a little easier for both of you.

Prepare for the conversation

Think about a good time and place to talk about sensitive subjects.

- Am I ready? How am I feeling?
- Do I have time - am I due to be somewhere, are they about to leave?
- Is this an appropriate place? Is it private?
- Some places to start a conversation: driving to the beach just the two of you, in a quiet spot at a club event or organise to catch up for a coffee.

Starting the conversation

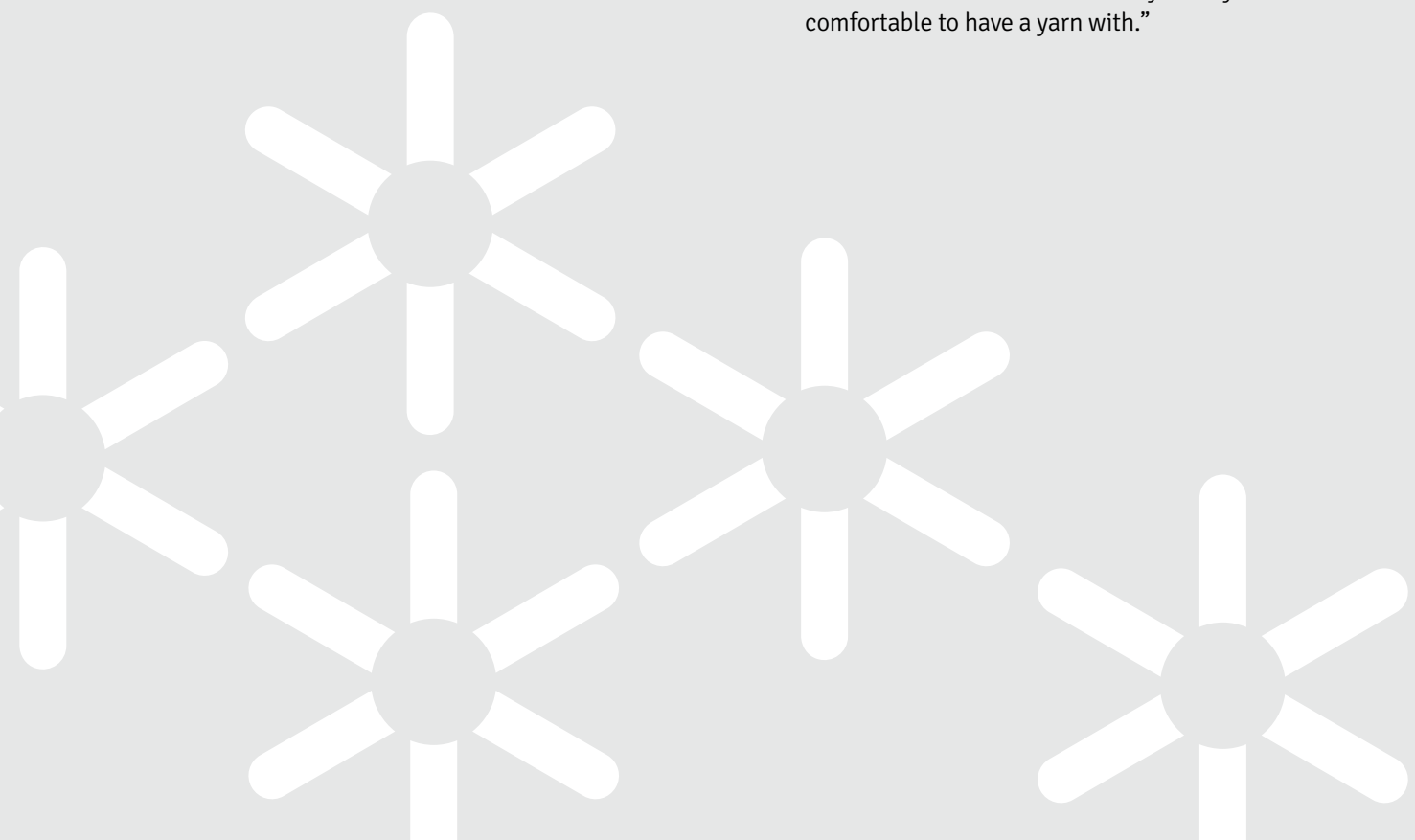
There is no perfect way to start a conversation about mental health. You might feel awkward doing it, that's ok.

Here's how you might like to approach it:

- Comment on the changes that you've noticed and let them know you're concerned, and you care.
 - » "Hey, I've missed you at our comps recently and I've noticed you seem more quiet than normal, is everything ok".
 - » "Hey mate, I'm a bit worried about you I have noticed you have been going pretty hard on the beers recently. Zero judgements just wanted to check in and see if you were doing ok?"
 - » "You seem upset or worried, what's going on? Can I help with something?"
 - » "Lately you seem... What's happening for you? We can work it out together if that would help."
- Be relaxed in your approach. You don't want them to feel like they're under investigation.
- Questions that start with "What's has been happening?" or "Why do you think that is?" can help the person open up.

Be prepared that the person may not be ready to talk:

- "I sense you are not ready to talk right now. But please know that I am here to listen if you change your mind."
- "If you are not comfortable talking to me, please have a think about someone else who you may feel more comfortable to have a yarn with."



Provide

It's about providing support that is useful for the person. This will include listening, empathy and practical suggestions. Responding in a way that shows you're really listening can make a big impact.

Avoid saying things like "Look on the bright side" or "Just focus on the positives". We might think that we're helping them by being upbeat, but it can make them feel worse. We can also make them feel like what they're going through isn't that important.

Instead, take what they say seriously and say things like:

- "That sounds really stressful/difficult. Let me know how I can help?"
- "Thanks for telling me, I know it can be hard to talk about these things."
- "I'm so sorry to hear that this is happening for you."
- "I can't even imagine what you're going through right now."
- "It sounds like it might be important for you to get some support with all this."
- "I'd like to find a way that I can be helpful for you. Would that be ok with you?"

Try and avoid rushing the conversation and try not to be afraid of sitting with silence. If you find this hard, take a deep breath and count to 10 before responding. Give that person some space and quiet to find the words to express what they're going through.

Taking the time to really try to understand can show the person you're a safe place to go to for support and might mean they end up sharing more.

Some support options to offer include:

- Encourage the person to get adequate rest, relaxation, food, exercise and time with friends and family.
- Give them options and allow them to have as much control over the process as possible.
- Encourage the person to utilise their informal and professional supports. This may include them talking with their mates, family or a support line.
- Provide the person with support options if they would like to speak with a professional mental health clinician: "Can I give you some options for more support?"

Some ways to encourage a person's engagement in seeking support could look like:

- "It sounds like you are juggling plenty of balls in the air right now. Is there a plan we can come up with to help you feel less overwhelmed?"
- "I'm not feeling very confident about the best way to help at the moment. Would it be ok if we called a service to help us figure out the best way forward?"
- "As I'm not a trained counsellor, I want to get you in contact with someone who can best help you. It sounds like things are really hard right now and I want you to get the support you need."

Touch base with the person a few weeks later if you are still worried about them.

Check out the [Where to find help for mental health](#) page.



Check in with yourself after

Having conversations about someone's mental health can be draining. After the conversation, check in with yourself and engage in one of your self care activities.

It's important to monitor your own mental health as well, if you start to notice any changes in yourself, seek support or make some changes to support your wellbeing.

The self-care action plan

Most of us could benefit from increasing our engagement in self-care activities.

Regularly engaging in self-care assists in keeping our stress buckets levels low. Including a new activity into your routine can sometimes be harder than it seems. How many times have you said you are going to do something more only to find a few months have passed and you haven't quite got around to it yet?

The self-care action plan can help us stick to goals. Have a look at the Surfing WA Boardriders Mental Health & Wellbeing Toolkit.

Some of their ideas for looking after yourself include;

- Take time out and enjoy your hobbies
- Spend time with friends, loved ones and people you trust
- Get enough sleep
- Keep active and eat well
- Talk about or express your feelings regularly
- Engage in relaxation
- Reduce drug and alcohol use

Choose one or two of the areas above or some of your own to focus on maximising and apply the questions.

- 1.** When will you do the activity and how often will you do it? (e.g. Monday afternoons , once a week)
- 2.** How will you know that you are getting benefit from engaging in the activity? (e.g. reduced physiological symptoms of stress, sleeping better, decrease in irritability)
- 3.** What could stop you from engaging in this activity? (e.g. work commitments, family commitments)
- 4.** What will help you engage in the activity? (e.g. going with a mate, put it in your timetable)

Practical steps for a supportive conversation

1 Choose the right environment

Ensure that the setting is quiet, private, and free of distractions. A comfortable environment allows for an open, uninhibited dialogue.

If someone has approached you in a setting that doesn't support a mental health and wellbeing conversation, move the conversation to a more appropriate setting.

2 Open the conversation gently

If you are the one initiating the conversation, open the conversation gently and with an open-ended question.

“Hey, I’ve noticed you’ve seemed a bit down lately. How are you feeling?”

If you have been approached by someone initiating the conversation, be available and open.

“I’m here for you. What can I do to help?”

3 Listen actively

Listening means more than just hearing words. Be attentive, maintain eye contact, and refrain from interrupting. Your primary role is to listen and validate. Hold soft, gentle eye contact. Say:

“mmm”, “uhuh”, “yes.”

4 Facilitate the conversation

Be present and show empathy. Remember, it's not about having all the answers but being there to provide understanding and support.

“It sounds like you’ve been going through a lot. How can I support you?”

“Thank you for sharing this with me. How can I best be here for you?”

“You’re not alone in this. I’m here with you.”

5 Avoid judgment

Stay neutral and avoid making judgments or offering unsolicited advice.

Avoid saying:

“You shouldn’t feel that way.”

Instead try:

“This sounds like a really hard time for you.”

6 Express concern and empathy

Convey your genuine worry and understanding.

“I’m really sorry to hear you’re feeling this way.”

7 Ask open-ended questions

Encourage them to share more by posing questions that can't be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

“What has been on your mind lately?”

8 Respect boundaries

If they are not ready to open up, don't push. Let them know you're available whenever they're ready to talk.

“No problem, just thought I would check in. I’m here for you, whenever you want to talk.”

If they have initiated the conversation and feel uncomfortable with any questions or are only sharing minimal information, let them know you remain available any time.

“I am really glad that you reached out. I can talk more whenever you are ready.”

9 Avoid comparing or minimising

Even if you've had similar experiences, everyone's journey is unique.

Avoid saying:

“I went through this too, and I was fine.”

Instead try:

“I can’t imagine exactly how you feel, but I’m here to support you.”

10 Offer resources

If appropriate, suggest professional resources or helplines. Always ensure they are safe, especially if they express thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Practical steps for a supportive conversation (continued)

11 Direct to professional support (if relevant)

Encouraging the person to seek professional advice and support is the end goal of this process. Remember that it is not your role to act as a mental health expert but to help people seek professional support. Providing the links above, encouraging the person to speak to their GP or contact a mental health service are ways to achieve this objective. Sometimes helping the person make the booking or first contact with a professional can be really valuable for someone experiencing a mental health and wellbeing issue.

“I’d love to help but I’m not really qualified to deal with this type of issue. Would you be willing to speak to a GP or call a helpline?”

“This sounds like a lot to deal with. Can I help you get in touch with a professional?”

“I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you. Can I help you make a booking with your GP or to call a helpline.”

Depending on your relationship with the person, attending the initial consult or being on the call with a helpline may be a useful way to support them – ask the person what they would prefer.

12 Follow up

Send them a message or call a few days later to see how they’re doing. Continuous support can be reassuring. It’s always a good idea to keep the check-in open-ended to invite a response, but also non-invasive to allow them to share what they’re comfortable with.

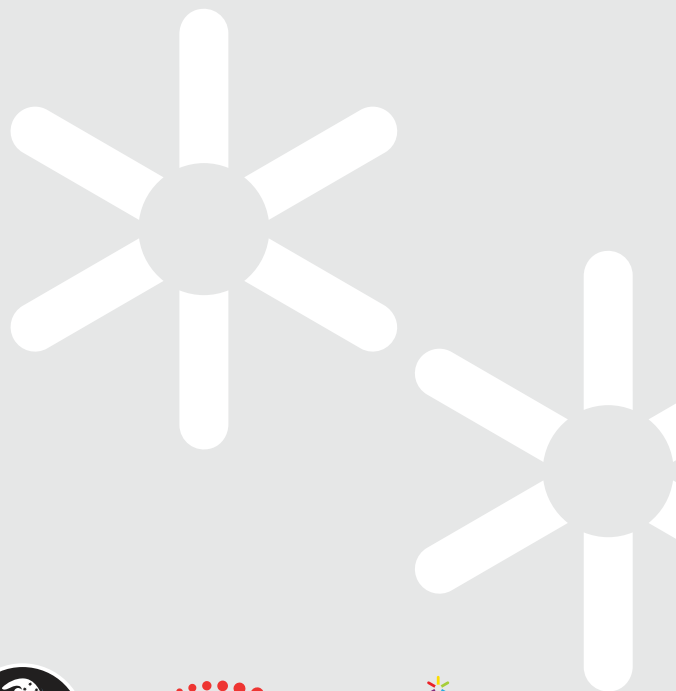
“Hey, I’ve been thinking about our conversation the other day. How have you been feeling since then?”

“I just wanted to check in and see how you’re doing. Is everything okay?”

“Hey there, it’s been a few days since we talked. I wanted to see if things have gotten any better for you?”

“Hello! Just wanted to drop a quick note to see how you’ve been since we last spoke?”

“Hey! Remember, it’s okay to seek help or someone to talk to if you need it. How are you holding up?”



In an Emergency Dial 000

For support call Lifeline 13 11 14

or visit thinkmentalhealthwa.com.au for more information

