

A photograph of a woman with long red hair, wearing a light blue Co-op uniform shirt, smiling warmly at a customer. The customer's back is to the camera, showing their brown hair and a dark blue Co-op uniform. They are in a grocery store aisle with shelves of products in the background.

Your mental health toolkit

A Co-op guide to help colleagues support each other.



It's what we do

Helping you to...

Understand what mental health is →

Know who and what the toolkit is for →

Spot common mental health problems →

Know how and when to get involved →

Find help and support →

What is mental health?

Mental health can affect our thinking, emotions and behaviour and can disrupt our ability to work, carry out simple daily tasks and engage in relationships.

We recognise that just like physical health, there is good and poor mental health and this can be different for all of our colleagues.

There are also different types of mental health problems, some of which are common, such as depression, stress and anxiety disorders, and some which are not common, such as bipolar or schizophrenia.

These terms don't give much information about what a colleague is really experiencing, that's why we have simplified this information to help guide you through spotting signs and symptoms and how you can help each other.

When you're experiencing a mental health problem, knowing that [support is available](#) can be life changing.



Speak to LifeWorks

You could speak to a close colleague, your line manager or you can contact the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) from a UK landline or a mobile with **FREE** contract minutes on **0800 069 8854**.

For online support, you can visit the LifeWorks website. www.coop.lifeworks.com

[Click here for our other toolkits to help support you and your colleagues](#)



Who and what is the toolkit for?



There are lots of ways you can help to improve mental health and wellbeing.

The support colleagues get from their teams at work is important in growing a mentally healthy workplace.

This toolkit has been designed to answer some of the questions you may have and explain what you can do to help colleagues who may be experiencing mental health problems.

It includes a number of [case studies](#) that show how you can have a great conversation and helps guide you through real life situations.

It also explains what support the Co-op can offer to you and your colleagues and where else you can find help and information.

It's important to remember that you're here to [help and support](#) colleagues.

You're not expected to have all the answers!

Who and what is the toolkit for?

This toolkit has been produced to help managers support their teams, but can be used by anyone.

Use this toolkit to:

- Grow your understanding of the most common mental health problems
- Learn a simple structure to have supportive conversations around mental health
- Share its content with your colleagues so you can help anybody who may have a mental health problem in your team
- Understand how and when the Co-op can support you and your team and know where to find help
- Help your friends and family, so everyone understand mental health conditions

Visit the support page if you need help and advice.



How to help colleagues

Make the time to have regular, informal chats with each member of your team. Not only does talking regularly with your colleagues help them feel more valued, it gives you more chance to get to know them as individuals.

Then it's more likely that you'll:

- Notice changes in their behaviour or performance
- Feel more at ease asking about their personal wellbeing or mental health

A key contributor to workplace stress is a lack of role clarity:

- Find opportunities to regularly talk over tasks and what's expected
- Encourage trusting and respectful communications
- Help colleagues feel more connected by having regular conversations about how individual roles contribute towards the overall direction of the Co-op
- Be aware of the behaviour that you model and the messages you send through what you do physically and how you communicate
- Offer support through the resources that are available
- Actively seek and become familiar with support yourself so you can point people to the right ones easily when they're needed



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How and when should I get involved?

What are the signs?

- Experiencing mood swings
- Having a lack of confidence
- Feeling sad or down
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Crying for no apparent reason
- Getting no pleasure in things you normally enjoy
- Having tense muscles and headaches
- Feeling worried or anxious
- Having difficulty focusing or remembering
- Drinking / smoking more
- Erratic behaviour
- Confusion
- Losing weight
- Self-harm
- Poor personal hygiene
- Looking tired
- Work performance drops



Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.



Read colleague case studies to help you see why, how and when you should get involved.



How should I encourage colleagues to open up to me?

Whether a colleague approaches you, or you ask to talk with them, you still need to encourage them to talk as openly and honestly as they can.



Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

Top tips



Get to know them and listen

Show you're interested, make time, let them finish their sentences and complete thoughts without interrupting. Only respond after they've finished.

Let them know it's 'OK not to be OK'!

We all get ill from time to time and mental health problems are no different to any other illness.

Safeguarding

If you are concerned about the safety of your colleague, or concerned they cannot protect themselves from harm, you should seek further advice.

Take them seriously

Try not to respond with statements that might belittle how your colleague might feel. Avoid comments such as, "You're just having a bad week," or "I'm sure it's nothing."

Make yourself available to talk again if needed

Whilst it can be a big relief for someone to share something they've been bottling-up, mental health problems are not usually solved in one conversation.

Let the person who's spoken with you know that you're there and if they're having a tough time, they can reach out to you again. It's OK to let them know if there are certain times of day or days of the week when you can't be available.

Don't use what you've been told as gossip

If someone is talking to you about their mental health, it was probably really hard for them to work up the courage to do so. If they're not in a good place it could set them back to hear people talking about them.

Never share what they tell you with others unless you've been asked to by the colleague. Let them share confidentially on their own terms.

Common mental health problems

What is Stress?

Stress can be defined as 'The feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure'.

Pressure turns into stress when a person feels unable to cope.

Signs & symptoms

Emotional

- Negative or depressive feeling
- Disappointment with yourself
- Increased emotional reactions - more tearful or sensitive or aggressive
- Loneliness, withdrawn
- Loss of motivation, commitment and confidence

Psychological

- Confusion, indecision
- Can't concentrate
- Poor memory

Behavioural

- Changes in eating habits
- Increased smoking, drinking or drug taking 'to cope'
- Mood swings affecting your behaviour
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Twitchy, nervous behaviour
- Changes in attendance such as arriving later or taking more time off



Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

Common mental health problems



What is Depression?

Depression is more than feeling unhappy or fed up for a few days.

Most people go through periods of feeling down, but depression is different.

People feel persistently sad for weeks or months.

Signs & symptoms

Emotional

- Down, upset or tearful
- Restless, agitated or irritable
- Guilty, worthless and down on yourself
- Empty and numb
- Isolated and unable to relate to other people
- Finding no pleasure in life or things you usually enjoy
- A sense of unreality
- No self-confidence or self-esteem
- Hopeless and despairing
- Suicidal

Psychological

- Catastrophic thinking hopeless thoughts
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty remembering things
- Difficulty making decisions

Behavioural

- Avoiding social events & activities you usually enjoy
- Self-harming or suicidal behaviour
- Finding it difficult to speak or think clearly
- Losing interest in sex
- Difficulty remembering or concentrating on things
- Using more tobacco, alcohol or other drugs than usual
- Difficulty sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Feeling tired all the time
- No appetite and losing weight, or eating too much and gaining weight
- Physical aches and pains with no obvious physical cause
- Moving very slowly, or being restless and agitated

Common mental health problems

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of 'unease, worry or fear', which everyone feels at some point in their life, but for some people it can be an ongoing problem.

There are different degrees of it too. Mild anxiety is vague and unsettling, whilst severe anxiety can be extremely debilitating and have a serious effect on being able to function in daily life.

Signs & symptoms

Physical

- Nausea (feeling sick)
- Tense muscles and headaches
- Pins and needles
- Feeling light headed or dizzy
- Faster breathing
- Sweating or hot flushes
- A fast, thumping or irregular heart beat
- Raised blood pressure
- Difficulty sleeping
- Needing the toilet more frequently, or less frequently
- Churning in the pit of your stomach
- Experiencing panic attacks

Psychological

- Mind is really busy with thoughts
- Dwelling on negative experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again (this is called rumination)
- Poor concentration

Behavioural

- Feeling tense, nervous and on edge, having a sense of dread, or fearing the worst
- Feeling like the world is speeding up or slowing down
- Feeling like other people can see your symptoms
- Feeling restless
- Feeling numb



Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

How and when should I get involved?

This '4 step' guide will help you to offer the best support that you can for your colleagues.



How you can support your colleagues

Understanding things from your colleagues' perspective is really important in making sure you can offer the right support and help.

Our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) support helpline is run by a separate organisation to the Co-op and is completely free and confidential. Don't ever feel alone, you can call from a UK landline or a mobile with **FREE** contract minutes on **0800 069 8854**.

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1. What am I helping with?

Understanding the wider situation is key. Ask questions and listen carefully to what they say so you can fully appreciate things like:

- What's happened?
- How're you feeling?
- How is this affecting you?
- How long has this been going on?
- Did something difficult happen before you started feeling this way?
- Can you describe what it's like?
- Who's been helping you?

2. What questions should I ask?

Don't feel you can't or shouldn't ask questions. It's really important that you do. It's more likely that a colleague who needs help will actually feel better. Your questions will help them talk.

Types of questions

In general, the questions you ask will fall into 2 groups, 'closed and open.'

Closed questions

Closed questions are perfect for helping you to confirm facts and information:

- When do you have these feelings?
- When did this happen?
- Who have you spoken to about this?
- Are you taking medication?
- Does anyone else know?
- Have you spoken to your GP?
- Do you have any other support?

You may find yourself needing to ask a lot of closed questions, which can feel like you're doing all the talking. This is OK but you want your colleague to open up and talk more freely. This is where open questions are really powerful.

Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

How you can support your colleagues

Sometimes it can feel like you're asking some pretty personal questions which can feel uncomfortable but, without a wider understanding it's not possible to help with the right support.

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Open questions

Using open questions will really help you understand your colleague's thinking, feelings and how this is affecting life at work and at home.

They're designed to encourage the colleague to talk more freely and 'open up'. The most effective way of doing this is to use prompting words like tell, explain and describe:

- Can you tell me how you're feeling?
- Could you tell me what's happened?
- Would you explain in your own words what's going on?
- Could you explain why you think this?
- Describe a situation when this happened?

Other questions that can help you to understand more, might include:

- What causes you to feel / think this way?
- What do you do to try and cope?
- Do you always feel like this?
- What causes you to feel stressed at work?
- What do you think will help?
- What can I do to help?

Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

How you can support your colleagues

3. What can suggest and/or do to help?

There are a few different ways in which you can offer help to colleagues, but there may be other things you feel you need to do, depending on the situation.

- What support will you offer to your colleague?
- What can you suggest that they do to get the **right help and support**?
- What other steps do you need to take?

4. When will I follow this up?

This will all depend on what you agree with your colleague. Wherever possible, you should always try to keep in contact and arrange follow up discussions to see how your colleague is getting on. Any arrangements you make need to work for both of you.

See the Co-op policies for contact when colleagues are off sick and sick note procedure on: colleagues.coop.co.uk

Ideal time frames for follow up conversations

- If they're off work, it would be ideal to have a chat at least once a week
- When they return to work after being off sick and you have a return to work meeting
- Shorter daily and/or weekly chats whilst they're at work, there is no right or wrong answer and support is available
- Whenever your colleague wants to discuss things. Remember to try and keep this within pre-agreed times

Don't worry about feeling like you are adding pressure by maintaining contact, the intention is that they know that you are there to support them.

Support if you are a manager

ER Services are the Co-op team who provide phone based HR support to colleagues who are managers. If you are a manager and feel you may need some advice, have a conversation with ER Services first.



Case study - Sarah

Depression:

You've known Sarah for about 6 months and she works with your team once or twice a week.

You've always found Sarah to be a happy, chatty colleague who appears popular when she works with your team. You've had no issues with the work she does.

Two days ago, you noticed that Sarah appeared a bit down, upset and tearful when she returned from her break.

Today you noticed that she's really quiet, is on her own not talking to anyone in her team and you feel that she doesn't appear to be her usual happy self.



Case study - Sarah

How do you start the conversation?

You explain to Sarah that you've noticed that she seems upset. Using open questions will really help you understand your colleague's thinking and feelings. You ask:

- Can you tell me how you are feeling?
- Do you always feel like this?

Through these questions you find out:

- She's been suffering from depression for a number of years
- She split up amicably with her partner about 2 months ago. This hasn't made her unhappy, but when she goes home she doesn't have any support
- Sarah hasn't spoken to her line manager about it yet as he always seems too busy

Based on the what you've found out you may think about the following:

- Let Sarah know that you're happy to talk but that it would be best if she had a chat with her line manager
- Offer to have a chat with her line manager on her behalf
- Suggest she contacts **LifeWorks (EAP)**, who can offer her support
- Suggest she contacts her GP and explain how she's feeling. They might be able to suggest an alternative to medication

When will you follow this up?

- You let Sarah know again that you're there for her if she wants to talk
- You make a point of chatting with her when she works with your team
- You **talk to ER Services** and follow up with her line manager

Get support

ER Services are the Co-op team who provide phone based HR support to colleagues who are managers. If you need help or advice on how to help a colleague who is upset or emotional get in touch with ER Services.

Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

Case study - Simon

Anxiety:

You have worked with Simon now and again but only through work. and only know him through work.

At lunch Simon started to complain that he was worried about the current political climate.

He seems to be worrying about the worst case scenario and imagining that what could go wrong, probably will.

Simon then approaches you looking very distressed and asks to talk to you in private.

He explains that he's recently begun suffering from panic attacks.

He's suddenly started feeling really anxious and thinks he's having one now.



Case study - Simon

How do you start the conversation?

Using closed questions will really help you understand facts and information quickly. You ask:

- When did this happen?
- Are you taking medication?
- have you spoken to your GP?

You ask Simon a few questions and find out:

- The panic attacks began about a month ago
- He hasn't told anyone else at the Co-op about this
- He's spoken to his GP but isn't taking medication
- He hasn't had an attack at work before
- He's feeling very anxious, can't concentrate and feels like he can't breathe

How can you help and support Simon?

Based on what you've found out you may consider the following:

- Try finding his line manager to support you
- Together, consider sending Simon home as you're not sure he should be at work. Where possible, he goes in a taxi or with a friend or colleague
- Suggest he [contacts LifeWorks \(EAP\)](#) as they may well be able to help
- Suggest he goes and sees his GP again
- Encourage him to keep talking to his line manager about how he's feeling

When will you follow this up?

- You let Simon know again that you're there for him if he wants to talk
- You make a point of chatting with him when he works with your team. You [talk to ER Services](#) and follow up with his line manager

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Case study - Joe

Stress:

Joe sadly lost Sally, his wife of 20 years about 8 months ago. You and Joe spoke fairly regularly and he was open about his feelings of sadness.

Joe had a short period of time off immediately after Sally died. You continued to 'check in' with him on a regular basis.

You were told recently, Joe had become very angry, upset and had burst into tears after a disagreement with another colleague.

In the past 2 weeks he has been late in to work and you've noticed that he's been looking tired, and he appears to have lost quite a lot of weight.



Case study - Joe

How do you start the conversation?

You explain to Joe how his recent behaviour is concerning you. You use open and closed questions to try and understand how you can help. You ask:

- Would you explain in your own words, what's going on?
- Could you tell me what's happened?
- What can I do to help?

Through these questions you find out:

- Joe's struggling to sleep and that's affecting his behaviour at work. This is also why he's been late
- He's been thinking about Sally a lot over the last couple of months and he feels incredibly sad about her death.
- He stays in most of the time and has no energy to go out and do things
- He hasn't tried to seek help from anyone about how he's feeling
- He'd really like to speak to someone but has no idea where to start

How can you help and support Joe?

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- He'd really like to speak to someone but has no idea where to start

When will you follow this up?

- You and Joe agree that catching up weekly would help but also that Joe can talk to you anytime he feels he needs to within the working day
- You **talk to ER Services** and follow up with his line manager



Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

It's good to talk

It's really important for colleagues to talk about mental health problems and tough times.



Who are ER Services and how can they help?

If you are a manager, you're often the best person to offer help and support to the colleagues in your team, although there may be times when this isn't possible. It maybe you don't know what to do or you feel that the situation is too much for you to cope with. This is where ER Services can help.

ER Services are the Co-op team who provide phone based HR support to colleagues who are managers.

They can support on most colleague related matters including wellbeing, absence and performance.

You should look at our [People Policies on the Colleague Website](#), or How Do I if you're in Store, in the first instance and call ER Services if you need more information or can't find what you're looking for.

You can call: 0330 606 1001 (option 2). They're open Monday to Friday 8am - 6pm and Saturday 8:30am - 4pm.

To help as best they can, they need to understand as much about the situation as possible. Ideally you should use the toolkit as a guide to get as much detail as possible before calling them. They'll also need to know what you've done to try and help so far, along with what the colleague's already doing for themselves.



Help and support

There is often a stigma around mental health and people don't like to talk about how they are feeling.

One great way to overcome this is by acknowledging the importance of your own mental health, talking about anxiety, depression, distress or anything that is causing you mental health problems.

The following links can be used to read, learn and contact others in order to support you to improve your mental health.

Many of the sites have downloadable fact sheets and take-away information which will support the use of this toolkit.

For more toolkits, including how to have great mental health and having the return to work conversations visit colleagues.coop.co.uk/mental-health-policy

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For online support, you can visit the LifeWorks website. www.coop.lifeworks.com

Here are links to online support:

- Mind.org - A starting point for anybody suffering from mental health conditions
- Samaritans - If you need somebody to talk to, the Samaritans are available 24 hours a day. Visit samaritans.org or Call 116 123
- Mentalhealth.org.uk - This UK's leading mental health research, policy and service improvement charity
- NHS choices - All of your health and well-being questions answered online with good support resources available
- Consumer Credit Counselling Service - Free advice on problem debt, based on what's best for you
- Medical emergency When someone is seriously ill or injured and their life is at risk. Call 999