

How do I start a conversation with someone who is struggling?

Speaking to others about personal or sensitive issues can feel strange and awkward at first, but it's extremely important that you do.

It may be the most important conversation that you ever have.

If you have that feeling that something is just not quite right with someone you know or care about... If they are just not themselves, acting out of character, or have become more withdrawn, you making the effort to start a conversation could very well be the incentive they need to open up or access further support.

It's simple. There are 4 simple steps that are outlined by RUOK (www.ruok.org.au):

1. Ask

- Be relaxed & friendly.
- Help them open up by questions like: "How are you going at the moment?"
- Mention the specific things that made you concerned, like "You've been pretty quiet lately compared to usual?"
- If they don't want to talk, let them know that you are always there to chat, or ask if there is anyone else they could speak to?

2. Listen

- Take what they say seriously & don't judge
- Don't interrupt
- Acknowledge that things seem tough for them.
- Encourage them to explain: "How are you feeling about that?" or "How long have you felt that way?"
- Show that you've listened by repeating back what you've heard (in your own words) and ask if you have understood them properly.

3. Encourage Action

- Ask: "What have you done in the past to manage similar situations?"
- Ask: "How would you like me to support you?"
- Ask: "What's something you can do for yourself right now? Something that's enjoyable or relaxing?"
- If they've been feeling really down for more than 2 weeks, encourage them to see a health professional. You could say, "It might be useful to link in with someone who can support you. I'm happy to assist you to find the right person to talk to."

4. Check-In

- Pop a reminder in your phone or diary to call them in a couple of weeks. If they're really struggling, follow up with them sooner.
- You could say: "I've been thinking of you and wanted to know how you've been going since we last chatted."
- Stay in touch and be there for them. Genuine care and concern can make a real difference.

Some Extra Tips to Help

Starting the conversation with the people you care about could just be the incentive they need to start the process of getting the support they need. It can even save lives.

Starting the Conversation

Be Prepared: It will help your confidence if you prepare what you're going to say in advance and have an idea of what you want to achieve out of the conversation (such as making sure that person knows about their available support services).

However, it's also just as important not to be too prepared, you still need to be flexible and adaptable for any unexpected revelations or new directions in the conversation.

Time and Place: Make sure you choose the most appropriate time and place to be having the conversation, as you don't want to be uncomfortable or feel rushed. Make sure you have access to a private, confidential space where you can't be seen or overheard by others.

Sometimes people feel more comfortable talking when they don't have to make eye contact, so try starting the conversation whilst you're doing another activity, like walking or watching the television instead of sitting face-to-face.

Be Normal: You want whoever you're speaking to to feel comfortable and at ease. They are more likely to open up and be receptive to what you're saying if you're acting like your usual self.

Take a deep breath, remind yourself that even if you don't know exactly how to help, you do know how to direct them to the right place for support and let the conversation flow there.

Be Supportive and Genuine: It's important to be thoughtful, genuine and understanding. Make sure to avoid any type of judgment or unhelpful comments.

Remember the Practicalities: Sometimes in our panic to make sure we're doing the right thing, we can forget about the smaller, practical details.

Make sure your phone is on silent, or avoid any situations where you can be disturbed. It might also be a good idea to have a box of tissues at the ready (just in case).

Example Conversation Starters

- "I've noticed that you haven't seemed yourself recently. What has been going on?"
- "I know you must be under a lot of stress at the moment with everything that's going on with [insert stressful life event]. How are you coping?"
- "I've been feeling worried about you. Do you mind if we talk about it?"

The most important thing is to just start the conversation - don't ever underestimate the impact this can have on someone struggling!