



POLICE

Supporting a colleague with a mental health problem

Blue Light Programme



Supporting a colleague with a mental health problem

This is a guide for police service staff and volunteers on how to support a colleague experiencing a mental health problem.



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What is a mental health problem?

Mental health problems can affect the way you think, feel and behave. Some mental health problems are described using words that are in everyday use, for example 'depression' or 'anxiety'. This can make them seem easier to understand, but can also mean people underestimate how serious they can be.

A mental health problem feels just as bad, or worse, than any other illness – only you cannot see it. Mental health problems are very common, affecting around one in four people in Britain. They're even more common among people in the police service, and can affect people regardless of gender or rank.

But there is still stigma and discrimination towards people with mental health problems, as well as many myths about what different diagnoses mean. Many people say that being discriminated against in work and social situations can be a bigger burden than the illness itself.

Our research shows:

- Police service staff and volunteers are more at risk of developing a mental health issue and are less likely to seek help from their employer than the general population.
- 91% of police have experienced stress and poor mental health at work.
- 50% of police service personnel think that colleagues would treat them differently, in a negative way, if they disclosed a mental health problem at work.

What should I say to a colleague with a mental health problem?

If your colleague had a broken leg, you probably wouldn't think twice about asking how they were. Anyone can experience a mental health problem, so being able to talk about it is important to us all. And you don't need to be an expert on mental health. Often, small everyday actions can make the biggest difference.

Show your support

If you know someone has been unwell, don't be afraid to ask how they are. They might want to talk about it, or they might not. But just letting them know they don't have to avoid the issue with you is important. Just spending time with the person lets them know you care and can help you understand what they're going through.

Ask how you can help

People will want support at different times in different ways, so ask how you can help. For example, if your colleague wants to get more exercise, you could do this together.

Be open-minded

Phrases like "Cheer up", "I'm sure it'll pass" and "Pull yourself together" definitely won't help. Be non-judgemental and listen. The person experiencing a mental health problem often knows best what is helpful for them.

Don't just talk about mental health

Keep in mind that having a mental health problem is just one part of the person. People don't want to be defined by their mental health problem, so keep talking about the things you have always talked about.

Show trust and respect

Mental health problems can seriously damage a person's self-esteem, and make them feel like they are personally and professionally worthless. By showing your colleague trust and respect at work, you can help to rebuild and maintain their sense of self-esteem. This will also help you to cope, as you will hopefully see your support having a positive impact on your colleague.

Look after yourself

It is important to maintain your own mental wellbeing (see p.25) – if you become unwell you will be less able to offer support.

Be patient

You might want to know more details about your colleague's thoughts and feelings, or want them to get help immediately. But it's important to let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.

When I've had problems with my mental health or wellbeing, the most helpful thing has been the team's acceptance of me.



How can I support a colleague to seek help for their mental health problem?

Our research shows that emergency services personnel are just as likely to seek help from a colleague as from a GP, so the support you offer can be really valuable.

If a colleague lets you know that they are ready to seek help for their mental health problem, there are lots of things you can do to support them. For example:

- **Listen.** Simply giving someone space to talk freely, without interruption or judgement, can be really helpful in itself. If they're finding it difficult, let them know that you're there to listen when they are ready.
- **Stay calm.** Even though it might be upsetting to hear that your colleague is distressed, try to stay calm. This will help them feel calmer too, and show them that they can talk to you openly without upsetting you.

- **Be patient.** You might want to know more details about your colleague's thoughts and feelings, or want them to get help immediately. But it's important to let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.
- **Try not to make assumptions.** Your perspective might be useful to your colleague, but try not to assume that you already know what may have caused their feelings, or what will help.
- **Keep social contact.** Part of the support you offer could be to keep things as normal as possible. This could include involving your colleague in social events, or chatting about other parts of your lives.
- **Learn more about the problem your colleague is experiencing,** to help you think about other ways you could support them. Our website provides lots of information about different types of mental health problems, including pages on what friends and family can do to help.



What can I do if someone doesn't want my help?

If you feel that your colleague is clearly struggling but can't or won't reach out for help, and won't accept any help you offer, it's understandable to feel frustrated. But it's important to accept that they are an individual, and that there are always limits to what you can do to support another person.

You can:

- **Be patient.** You won't always know the full story, and there may be reasons why your colleague is finding it difficult to ask for help.
- **Offer support and reassurance.** Let them know you support them and you'll be there if they change their mind.
- **Inform them how to seek help when they're ready.** For example, you could show them our booklet on seeking help for a mental health problem, which includes details about police service-specific organisations that could help.
- **Look after yourself,** and try not to become unwell (see p.25).

You can't:

- **Force someone to talk to you.** It can take time for someone to feel able to talk openly, and putting pressure on them to talk might make them feel less comfortable telling you about their experiences.
- **Force someone to get help** (if they're over 18, and are not posing immediate danger to themselves or someone else). As adults, we are all ultimately responsible for making our own decisions. This includes when – or if – we choose to seek help when we feel unwell.
- **See a health care professional for someone else.** A doctor might give you general information about symptoms or diagnoses, but they won't be able to share any specific advice or details about someone else without their consent.

Mind Blue Light Infoline

If you're worried about your colleague and are not sure what to do, you can call the Mind Blue Light Infoline. Our Infoline can give you confidential, independent and practical advice to help you support your colleague.

Call 0300 303 5999*

Text 84999

Email bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

*9am–6pm, Mon to Fri,
calls charged at local rates



How can I help a colleague experiencing suicidal feelings?

Suicidal feelings can be frightening and painful for the person who is experiencing them, as well as for those around them. If a colleague is experiencing suicidal feelings, here are some things you can do:

Try not to judge

If someone you know is thinking about taking their own life, it's understandable to feel shocked, frightened or angry. However, it's important to try not to judge that person or blame them for the way they are feeling. Often, finding someone who is prepared to listen and be supportive is the first step towards a person seeking help.

Talk to the person about how they feel

If you think someone is suicidal, one of the most important things you can do is to talk to them about how they feel and be there to listen. Even just giving them time to talk by listening and reflecting back what they have said can be very helpful.

The thing I find most helpful, is just knowing someone is there. Sometimes just listening to someone drivel on about mundane things. Sometimes talking about how I feel – just simply saying to someone I feel suicidal.

It's okay to ask someone about their suicidal feelings. Talking about suicide will not put the idea into their head, but will encourage them to talk about their feelings.

It's understandable that you may feel pressure 'to say the right thing', but remember by just being there and listening in a compassionate way, you are helping that person to feel less isolated and frightened.

Encourage them to get help

Even when someone appears to be absolutely determined to take their own life, it is important to explore every possible option and source of support with them. You could talk to them about the idea of getting help and ask them how they feel about this. By doing this, you can start to encourage them to get support. This may be by going to see a therapist or a counsellor. See our booklet on seeking help for a mental health problem for ideas on where to start.



Ask how you can help

Someone may know what helps them or what has worked in the past. If they know, they can tell you what it is. If they don't, you could have a conversation with them about what you can do and perhaps write a support plan together. It is important they agree to the help you offer.

Help them stay safe

If someone is feeling suicidal and talks to you about intending to end their life, stay with them. Remove anything that could cause harm, such as sharp objects.

Help them think about positive things

Exploring reasons for living can be a positive way of supporting someone who is feeling suicidal.

Even when I've been in the midst of despair and unable to see any way forward, being reminded that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary state of affairs has helped me focus on the hope that all things pass.

Look out for warning signs

It can be very difficult to recognise when someone is intending to take their own life; a suicide attempt can seem to come suddenly, and sometimes the person might go to great lengths to hide these feelings. If someone often experiences suicidal feelings, they may know their own warning signs and might be able to tell you what these are or write them down. This could help you to look out for the signs in the future.

Warning signs to watch out for include:

- stressful events at work
- experiencing bereavement or loss
- feelings of shame
- isolation or loneliness
- loss of self-esteem
- sleep problems
- use of suicide-promoting websites
- someone taking less care of themselves, for example eating badly or not caring what they look like
- a sense of uselessness and having no purpose – feeling "What's the point?"

- someone talking about ending their life or about suicide in general
- a marked change of behaviour – someone may appear to be calm and at peace for the first time or, more usually, may be withdrawn and have difficulty communicating.

If you're worried that someone is at immediate risk of taking their own life, you should stay with that person and take one of the following steps:

- encourage them to ring the Samaritans, 116 123, open 24 hours a day
- contact their GP for an emergency appointment or the out of hours service
- ring 999 or NHS direct on 111
- go to the nearest A&E department.

If someone has attempted suicide, you should ring 999 and stay with them until the ambulance arrives.





How can I look after myself?

Supporting someone experiencing a mental health problem can be stressful. Making sure that you look after your own wellbeing can mean that you have the energy, time and distance to help someone else. For example:

- **Take a break when you need it.** If you're feeling overwhelmed by supporting someone or it's taking up a lot of time or energy, taking some time for yourself can help you feel refreshed.
- **Talk to someone you trust about how you're feeling.** You may want to be careful about how much information you share about the person you're supporting, but talking about your own feelings to a friend can help you feel supported too.
- **Be realistic about what you can do and don't take too much on.** Your support is really valuable, but it's up to your colleague to seek support for themselves. Remember that small, simple things can help, and that just being there for them is probably helping lots.

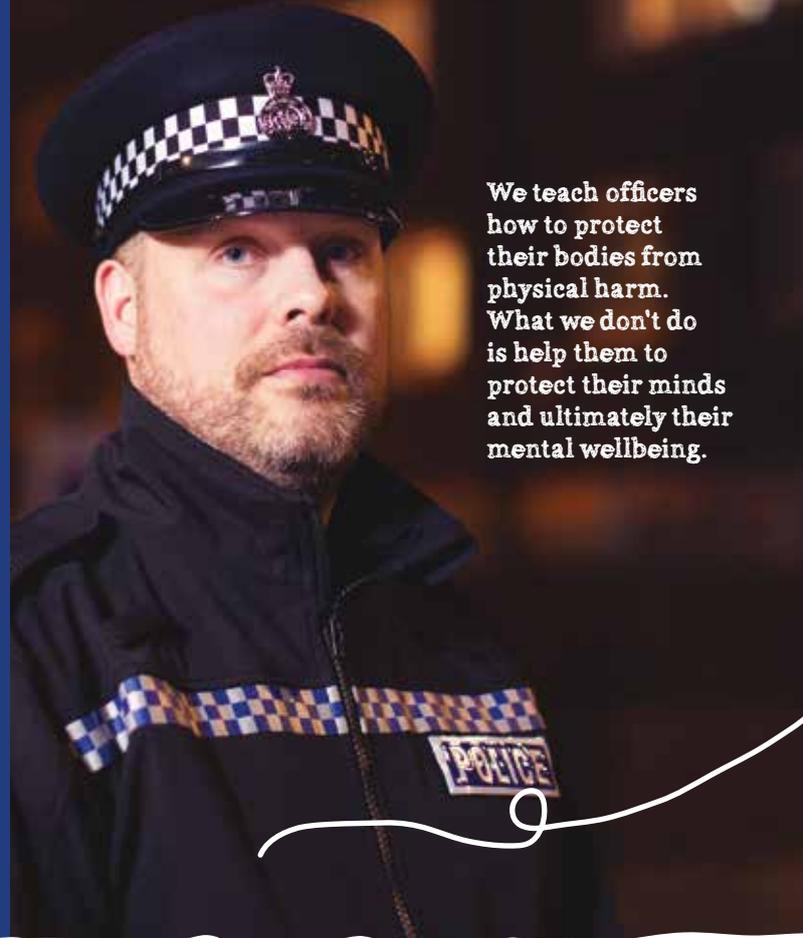
For more ideas about how to keep yourself well, see our booklet on how to manage your mental wellbeing.

Ed's story

I've been a police officer for 15 years, always working the front line. Occasionally I worked as a family liaison officer, dealing with families who had lost loved ones. I felt confident and competent in the role, but unbeknownst to me it was slowly eating away at both my emotional and mental wellbeing.

Seven years into that role, I had to meet the parents of a young lad. As they grieved for him in the mortuary, suddenly my 'shield' – the one you develop as a cop, the one that protects you from all the death and destruction you deal with – just disintegrated. I cried for the first time at work that day; I cried with the family, I cried in the car afterwards and at home later that night. I put it down to being tired and a little run down. But things were never the same.

Over the next few years I deteriorated further. I wasn't able to cope with things in the same way anymore. Anything even slightly emotional hit me hard. The person I thought I was had started to fall apart at the seams. And I still genuinely believed there was nothing wrong with me; that everyone else felt the same, they just coped better.



We teach officers how to protect their bodies from physical harm. What we don't do is help them to protect their minds and ultimately their mental wellbeing.

Then, on 15 June 2012, while working as a custody officer, everything changed. I arrived at work but I just couldn't connect with what was going on around me. I had been like a boiling kettle for months, with a relentless screeching noise in my head – and then, suddenly, it clicked off. There was finally silence.

At first it felt great. It was a relief to have respite from everything I had been going through. But the downside was I now didn't care about anything – myself, my family or friends. I just wanted to be left alone.

I was no longer functioning and I had no choice but to take time away from work. There wasn't much left of me. The person I thought I was – my identity – had turned to dust.

It was almost a year before I was able to return to work. I had convinced myself I was the only police officer that had ever had a mental illness. I thought, "How am I going to tell people I am suffering from depression and I'm not the same person anymore?" I had two options. When someone asked "Where have you been?" I could lie and make something up, or tell the truth. I am so glad I decided to be honest and open.

I've never had one negative reaction. People react with empathy, and often disclose that either they, a family member or a friend has suffered from mental illness. How stupid is it to think that people who work in the blue light services, who deal with all the bad things in society, are immune from mental illness? We are not, and there is no shame in that. We teach officers how to protect their bodies from physical harm. What we don't do is help them to protect their minds and ultimately their mental wellbeing.

Under the banner of the Blue Light Programme, I talk to new recruits. I tell them my story and hope they see that it's completely natural to feel upset with what they will encounter as police officers, and that it's okay to talk about it. Because talking with a colleague, friend or family member might help process how you are feeling and prevent it from becoming that seed which grows and grows and one day erupts – like it did with me.

This isn't how I saw my career panning out when I joined 15 years ago, but if this is my legacy, if sharing my experience helps to make a change within the service and ultimately helps other officers stay well, then I'm more than happy with that.

Useful contacts

Mind Blue Light Infoline

0300 303 5999

(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm, local rates)

text: 84999

bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

mind.org.uk/bluelight

The Blue Light Infoline offers confidential, independent and practical support, advice and signposting around mental health and wellbeing. The Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families, to help keep you or those you care about well for work.

NHS 111

Call: 111

Advice in England when you need medical help fast but it's not an emergency.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

Chris PO Box 90 90

Stirling FK8 2SA

24-hour helpline (free-to-call): 116 123

jo@samaritans.org

samaritans.org

24-hour emotional support for anyone struggling to cope.

This is a shortened version of the original text.
For the full online version, visit mind.org.uk/BlueLightBooklets

Give us your feedback

Email bluelight@mind.org.uk if you have any feedback on this booklet.

References available on request

Published by Mind 2015 ©2015

To be revised 2018

We're Mind, the mental health charity.

We won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

mind.org.uk/BlueLight

bluelight@mind.org.uk

Mind Blue Light Infoline:
0300 303 5999 (Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm,
local rates), or text: 84999

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We're a registered charity in England
(no. 219830)

Funding administered by



Cabinet Office

