

TALKING TO COLLEAGUES ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

A GUIDE FOR FURTHER EDUCATION STAFF

WRITTEN BY EDUCATION SUPPORT

Introduction

We all have mental health – just like we all have physical health – and many of us will have periods in our life where we feel less mentally well. This may go hand in hand with the general ebb and flow of life stresses that we inevitably encounter, or sometimes it might be harder to pinpoint why we feel a certain way.

In this guide we explore why it's important for further education (FE) staff to feel they can ask for help whenever they require it, how to approach conversations around mental health with colleagues and where to get further support when they need it.



Why might FE staff struggle to talk about mental health?

Barriers to talking about mental health in FE settings can include:



Stigma

If you feel that mental health issues are stigmatised in your FE setting this may cause you to be concerned about being judged, discriminated against or worry about your job security



Support

FE settings can have significantly varied provision and resources available to support staff mental health. Or sometimes the support available to staff is not widely known or effectively communicated



Trust

To confide in a colleague there needs to be an element of trust, without trusting relationships we are less likely to seek support. See our guide on building collegiate relationships for tips on fostering trust among colleagues in FE settings

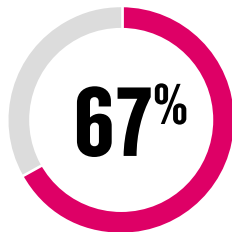


Workload

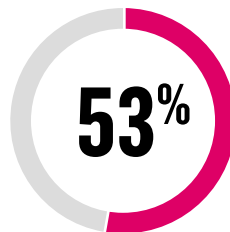
The UCU Workload survey (2022), reported that staff in all FE settings are working multiple unpaid days every week and working way above contracted hours. High workloads and demands can contribute to poor mental health and can make it difficult for staff to prioritise their mental wellbeing. It can also impact on their time to talk to somebody if they are struggling

Why it is essential to reduce mental health stigma in FE settings

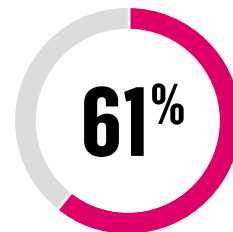
Education Support's **Teacher Wellbeing Index (2022)** has highlighted that:



of FE professionals would describe themselves as 'stressed'



have considered leaving their job



have actively sought a change to their current role

With these alarming statistics, discussing mental health and wellbeing openly is of increasing importance in order to create a workplace culture where people feel valued, cared for and psychologically safe.

Breaking down these barriers and promoting a culture of openness and support around mental health can help FE staff feel more comfortable discussing their mental health and accessing support when they need it. It will also enable them to better support learners and create the environment they need to thrive.



Tips for talking to colleagues living with mental health conditions or experiencing poor mental health

Talking to a colleague living with a mental health condition or experiencing poor mental health might feel daunting or you might be concerned about saying the 'wrong' thing. Here are some approaches to consider:

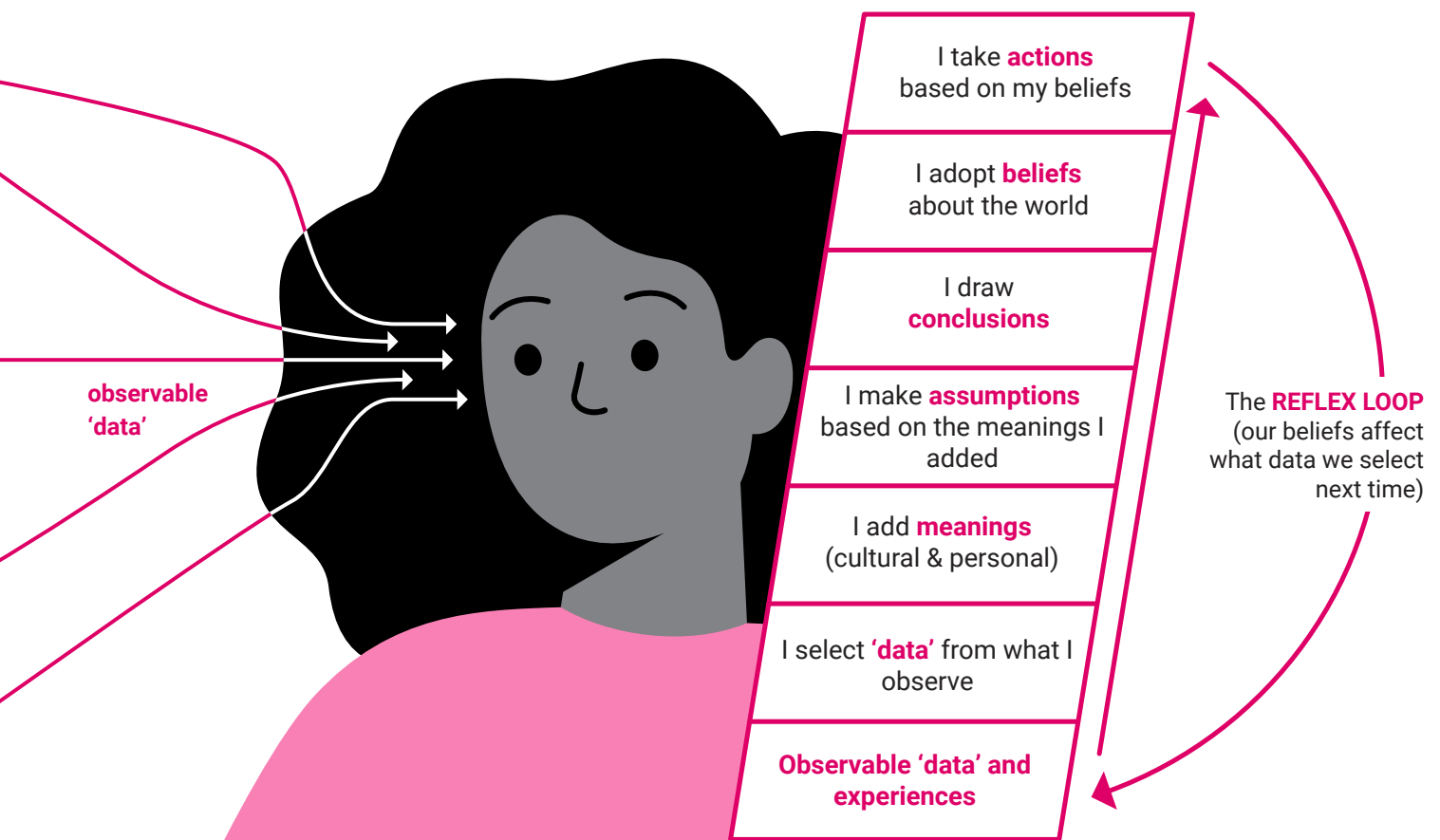
- **Be sensitive and curious about your colleague's feelings and experiences.** Remember everyone's experience will be unique to them
- **Avoid judgements or making assumptions or stereotypes** about a colleague's mental health condition
- **Be supportive, express any concern and don't shy away from talking about it.** Let them know you are there to support them
- **Confidentiality is important when discussing mental health issues.** Ask for permission before discussing the topic with others and respect their privacy
- **It can help to learn about the specific condition your colleague is living with.** This can help you have a more informed and empathetic approach
- **You may want to ask if there is anything you can do to help support your colleague in the workplace.** However, remember to be mindful of what you can take on without upsetting your own wellbeing
- **If your colleague is struggling with their mental health,** encourage them to seek help from your organisation, GP or a mental health professional
- **If a colleague is confiding in you, it may be a challenge to process traumatic information.** Make sure you reach out for any support you need (see signposting at the end of this guide).

Ladder of Inference

Psychologist Carl Rogers talks about the need to hold someone in unconditional positive regard. One thing this means is observing your own judgements but not letting the person you're talking to feel them.

For example, in a conversation about mental health, you may privately not understand why a situation has created such a strong reaction in the person you are talking to. But to voice this would undermine any feelings of trust and support you have built. There will likely be things going on that you don't understand.

Carl Rogers advises that we observe our judgements and work out what we know factually and what we do not.



For example, the observable data might be that I see a colleague crying. I may jump to the top of my ladder to think they are not coping. I may think they are stressed and overwhelmed. However, they could be crying with joy or pride. A learner could have achieved something brilliant due to that person's support. Before jumping to a conclusion, acknowledge your jump in thinking (up the ladder!). When talking to the colleague start with the observable data (you are crying) and then ask open questions to find out more e.g. I can see you are crying, talk to me about how you are feeling.



Ways to approach a conversation about mental health

With a colleague

When having a conversation with a colleague you're worried about, it's important to approach the conversation with empathy, openness, and respect. In a busy FE environment, finding the right time can be a challenge and may need to be engineered so that you can have an uninterrupted and confidential chat.

Active listening and empathy

Pay close attention to what your colleague is saying and use non-verbal cues to show you are engaged in the conversation – remember these might vary depending on if you are working remotely or in person. Repeat back what they have said to show you understand. Try to understand your colleague's perspective and imagine what they are going through. Show compassion and offer support.

Open-ended questions and language

Ask open-ended questions that encourage your colleague to talk about their experiences and feelings. Use language that is non-judgmental and supportive.

Advice

Unless your colleague specifically asks for advice, although sometimes a challenge, it's often best to avoid giving it. You will need to judge this carefully but do suggest they seek further support.

Respect confidentiality

If your colleague shares personal information, respect their privacy and confidentiality. The caveat to this is if you are concerned for their immediate safety.

With your manager

If you are needing some extra support, talking to your line manager about mental health can be difficult, but it can also be an important step in getting the support you need. If you are not comfortable talking to this person, is there an alternative person in your organisation who you could speak to?

You may wish to consider the following:



Plan ahead

Having a script can be very helpful. Write down your thoughts and rehearse what you want to say. You could read it out if it helps



Time & place

Pick a time and place that is private and conducive to having an honest and open conversation. Making an appointment with someone is often better than trying to 'catch them' in the moment



Be honest

Be clear about your experiences and how they are affecting your work. If you know what you need, explain what support you need. If you are not sure, be open to discussing your needs



Know your entitlements

Check your setting's policy on mental health support and the resources available to you. This can help you to advocate for the support you need



Follow up

After the conversation, follow up with your line manager by email to ensure that any agreed actions are written and recorded



Take responsibility

Engage in learning and development where you can to enhance your skills and confidence

By having this conversation, you can get the support you need to manage your mental health and maintain your wellbeing in the workplace. It's important to remember that mental health is a normal part of life and there is no shame in seeking support. Your manager has a duty of confidentiality and care towards you.

With staff members

It is important for FE leaders and managers to create workplace cultures that prioritise and support the mental health of staff. Here are some key points to consider if you are a manager:

Lead by example

You might want to demonstrate your commitment to your own mental health by being open about experiences and ensuring that you seek support when you need it. This will put you in a better position to support colleagues. Personally address mental health stigma in the workplace by promoting an inclusive and accepting environment. Promote your own self-care and in turn, encourage staff to prioritise their self-care.

Create a safe and supportive environment

Encourage staff to talk openly about their experiences and support one another. This can be a challenge in a fast-paced FE environment with staff often on multiple sites and with varying timetables, but it is important that this is addressed collectively in team meetings and by you checking in with individuals.

Educate staff

Provide professional development opportunities for staff to learn about mental health, including causes, symptoms, and effective treatments. This will help them spot signs of poor mental health in learners, and enable them to signpost effectively. Any CPD such as training to develop mental health literacy would be beneficial.

Gather data from staff

While many FE organisations offer a range of support services and wellbeing activities, gathering data on the causes of poor mental health in the workforce can help tailor the most appropriate support for your FE setting.

Getting support for yourself or a colleague

If you are concerned about a colleague or yourself then make sure you reach out for professional help:

- **Education Support's** helpline **(08000 562 561)** is on hand for immediate, confidential emotional support
- Visit the **Education Support website** for a range of free resources
- **Go to your GP** – you can ask for an emergency appointment
- **If you need immediate support and are experiencing a mental health crisis** there are also short-term crisis services available such as walk-in **Samaritan** branches
- **For a colleague in crisis**, you can call **999** or they can go to **A&E**.

Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their **free and confidential** helpline **24/7** on **08000 562 561**. Or check out **[educationsupport.org.uk](https://www.educationsupport.org.uk)** for free resources and tools to help you and your colleagues.



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