

HOW TO APPROACH EMOTIONAL CONVERSATIONS AT WORK

Although we may not think about it, emotions are present in all our interactions. Emotions influence our decision-making, our approach to problem-solving and the way we see the world. Because of this, emotions will also be present in our conversations at work.

Some conversations, and some topics, can cause stronger emotions than others. When considering our workplace conversations it can be helpful to consider which situations may require a little bit more emotional awareness and preparation.

Not everyone is comfortable having emotional conversations and many of us may not be experienced at having them in the workplace. However, we all have the opportunity to improve our skills over time.

When might an emotionally-aware conversation be necessary at work?

- ✓ You have, or a team member has, returned to work following a leave
- ✓ Your mental or physical health is declining due to workplace factors
- ✓ A significant event or change occurred in the workplace that has impacted you or your team
- ✓ You notice significant changes to your behaviour or the behaviour of others
- ✓ You are concerned about the physical or mental well-being of a co-worker
- ✓ You, or others you work with, are going through an especially difficult time

HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE DURING AN EMOTIONAL CONVERSATION

The suggestions below offer an approach we can use to help make even challenging conversations safe and respectful: show up, avoid dismissive phrasing and use emotionally supportive language.

SHOW UP

- ✓ Part of co-creating and maintaining a psychologically safe work environment is showing up to support one another — even when it is challenging or uncomfortable
- ✓ Don't worry if you don't know the "right" thing to say; often just offering a kind, listening ear can be helpful in itself
- ✓ Practice knowing your personal and professional boundaries
- ✓ If someone shares something that you are not equipped to respond to, thank them for their openness and redirect them to a more appropriate support (such as a Supervisor, HR, EFAP, a friend etc.)

AVOID DISMISSIVE LANGUAGE

- ✗ Sometimes, in our attempt to support someone, we may unintentionally minimize the significance of their experience
- ✗ If someone is coming to you because they're struggling, receiving emotionally dismissive language can leave them feeling unseen, unheard and disempowered. This might come in the form of:
 - ✗ Dismissive phrasing or minimization: "That doesn't sound so bad!"
 - ✗ Negation: "It could be worse!"
 - ✗ Offering solutions: "I bet it would all be okay if you just got more sleep."
 - ✗ Unproductive, or toxic, positivity: "Everything happens for a reason."

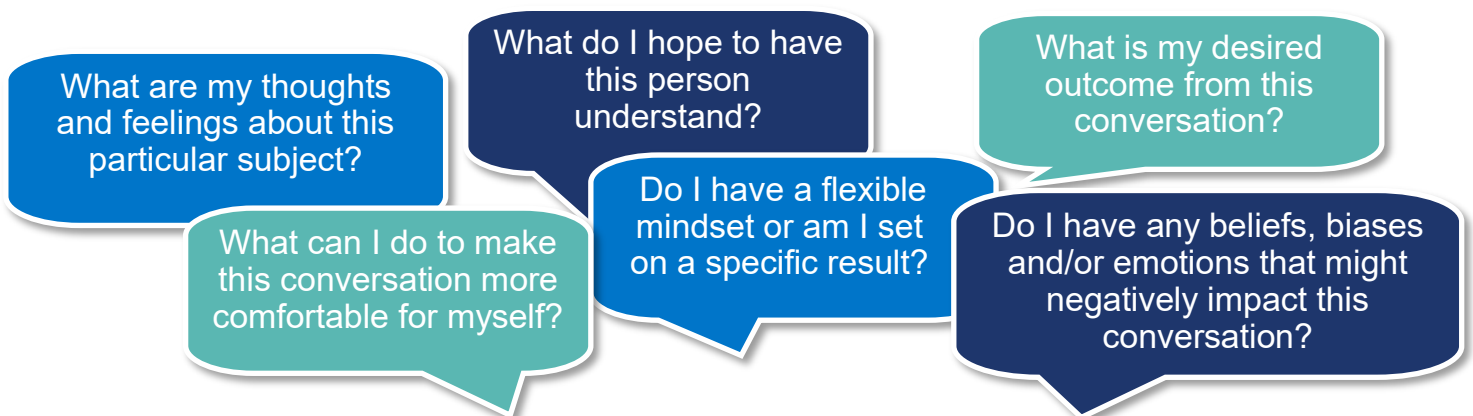
USE EMOTIONALLY SUPPORTIVE LANGUAGE

- 1. Validate their experience** with phrases such as “I can see why this would be challenging”. Validating someone’s experience can bring comfort in and of itself.
- 2. Seek to understand.** Be curious and ask open-ended questions. Curiosity shows the other person that you want to learn more so you can support them appropriately.
- 3. Help them determine what they need.** Prompt them with questions such as “What might be helpful for you to do right now?”
- 4. Offer specific support** within your personal or professional scope. “Would it be helpful if I ___ to assist you?” Clear and specific support may be easier for them to accept.
- 5. Invite perspective versus solutions.** Use questions like “Would it be helpful to hear what I found useful in the past?” Don’t assume what worked for you will work for them.
- 6. Acknowledge and appreciate them.** Thank them for trusting you with what they have shared. Acknowledge the courage it takes to speak up and seek out support.

HOW TO INITIATE A DIFFICULT OR EMOTIONAL CONVERSATION

Once you decide it is time to have a conversation, the following suggestions can help you prepare.

Before you ask to the person to talk, reflect on:



Consider who is best to talk to: Depending on the nature of the conversation, consider who will be able to help provide the outcome you are hoping for. When possible and appropriate, speak directly to an individual involved in the situation or someone in a position to offer assistance.

You might also decide to seek help from a specially trained professional, such as a member of your healthcare team, or a coach or counsellor with [Homewood Health](#). If you are a People Leader, Homewood’s [Key Person Advice Line](#) is another good option.

TIPS FOR HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Once you've initiated the conversation, the following tips may be helpful.

Focus on effects



Consider the result you want to achieve. If you are discussing something work related, focus on outcomes that would make your workplace more conducive to your physical and mental well-being.

Set aside some time



These conversations require focused attention from both people. Find a comfortable, private place to talk so you can both speak openly.

Be honest



Give as much context as possible. You do not have to disclose everything but speaking up for what you need and sharing how you are doing are important in effectively dealing with a conflict or challenging situation.

Progress not perfection



Sometimes we don't say anything because we worry we will say the wrong thing, or that we won't know how to help. Starting the conversation is often the hardest part. Give it a try anyway. You'll likely surprise yourself!

Check-in



If possible and appropriate, check back in with the person you spoke to. If the conversation happened with your manager or supervisor, let them know on during 1:1 meetings how things are going.

Take care of yourself



Having emotional conversations can be hard. Give yourself time to recover and don't be surprised if you need more support than usual in the next few days.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [How Supportive Leaders Approach Emotional Conversations \(hbr.org\)](https://hbr.org)
- [Supportive conversation library \(workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com\)](https://workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com)
- [Preparing for a difficult conversation \(workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com\)](https://workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com)
- [Return to the Workplace Toolkit - Psychological Well-being \(currents.vancouver.ca\)](https://currents.vancouver.ca)