

Open Your Heart CONVERSATION STARTER

If your colleague or loved one is struggling, opening your heart and reaching out can be a critical first step in helping them get the support they need. It can be difficult, but at the appropriate time and place, you can start a meaningful conversation.

If you're concerned that someone close to you is exhibiting the HEART Vital Signs, the following tips can serve as a helpful guide. With each individual and situation being different, there is no universal way to approach these tough discussions. If you need further guidance or you are in a crisis, call the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273 TALK (8255) for free 24/7 support.



Preparing for the Conversation

One of the most useful things you can do is prepare. Like most things, preparation begins with education. Before you open your heart and have a conversation, locate available resources or support groups to learn more about the underlying risk factors for suicide and updated research on physician burnout. Education can help dispel common misunderstandings that can get in the way of providing support. Here are some organizations with additional resources to help guide you:

- **National Alliance on Mental Illness** (nami.org)
- **Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center** (sprc.org)



Finding the Right Time

Most times, you won't be able to speak with someone the moment you notice they might need support. But, for tough conversations like these, it's okay to find the right time that provides a calm and comfortable environment where privacy is being respected. When finding the right time, think about a time that there:

1. Won't be interruptions
2. Neither person is overly tired
3. Won't be distractions by other obligations



Choosing the Right Language

How you talk about your concerns can make or break how the person handles the conversation and is open to your support. Your language needs to reinforce patience, understanding and hope. You need to be careful to not come across as criticizing or shaming the person. Positive ways to start a conversation are:

"I've noticed you're [angry, agitated, etc.], is everything okay?"

"I wanted to check in with you because I've noticed you haven't seemed yourself lately. Is everything okay?"



Listening, Actively

Equally important to how you talk, is how you listen. Even if it's not what you want or expect to hear, you need to acknowledge what the conversation partner is saying, show them you're listening and reiterate your support and willingness to help. Questions you can ask to help guide the conversation to listen rather than fix their problems are:

"When did you begin feeling like this?"

or

"Did something happen to make you start feeling this way?"

"How can I best support you?"

or

"Have you thought about getting help?"



Navigating Resistance

It is wise to plan for some level of resistance—or even denial. Always remain calm and patient and show your authentic support. Some things you can say in the moment are:

"I can tell you're not ready to take about this right now, but know I care about you and here when you are ready."

"I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care and want to help."

After the initial conversation, continue to follow up and be proactive.

Call them, don't wait for them to call you to check in. Help them locate a specialist or facility to get professional help. Continue your support over the long haul.

Opening your heart is an important step in preventing physician suicide. Check in with colleagues and loved ones and support them when needed.

Visit physiciansfoundation.org/vitalsigns to learn more about physician wellbeing.

