# Helping others help themselves

Mental illness can strike at any time. And because there are many disorders and symptoms, it can be hard to know whether worrying signs are just a result of a stressful or difficult emotional phase or signal a mental illness. Stigma can make talking about these issues with someone you suspect may be suffering from a mental illness difficult and daunting. You may fear that the person will be offended, or shut you out—when it's likely the last thing you want to do.

But turning a blind eye to a mental health concern could actually deprive a friend, relative or co-worker of the support and care they might want but are too afraid or uncomfortable to ask for. Sensitivity, caution and care can open the lines of communication, and create an environment where the loved one or colleague feels safe to discuss the matter or seek out professional support. The information below can help you spot the signs of mental health issues and learn how to effectively start a delicate dialogue with someone you're concerned about.

**Warning signs**

Spotting the signs of mental illness is not always easy, especially since symptoms and their severity will depend on the person and the illness. Common signs of distress that can point to mental illness include:

- Unprovoked emotional outbursts
- Obvious personality changes
- Problems coping with daily activities and challenges
- Major changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Difficulty making decisions, concentrating or remembering things
- Extreme anxiety

**Reaching Out to a Loved One**

You've noticed something is wrong but are uneasy and unsure of how to talk about it. Remember: the sooner your loved one gets help, the quicker they'll receive the support they need to thrive: studies show that early intervention speeds the recovery process. But how do you get the conversation rolling? Start by:

- **Showing concern.** Your loved one may feel shame, guilt, fear or confusion. Pick a calm quiet time to broach the topic and gently express your concern by saying, "I'm worried about you and want to help," or,*"I've noticed that you seem anxious (or withdrawn, or angry—whatever the symptom displayed is) are you alright?"* Actively listen to any response without interrupting or making any judgmental comments that can cause your loved one to shut down. Letting loved ones know you've got their best interest at heart creates a more sharing and caring environment of security.
- **Suggesting resources.** Investigate services in the area that may be able to help. Whether it's a hotline, your Employee Assistance Program (if your loved one is covered under your plan), or a local clinic, providing relevant and real information can help ease anxiety over finding support services. It's also a non-threatening way to leave the decision in loved ones' hands, encouraging them to explore mental health support options when they're ready to do so.
- **Offering help.** While you may not have the expertise to directly help others cope with mental issues, your emotional and physical presence can be invaluable. From drives to the doctor, to a shoulder to cry on, to making a favourite dish—the little things you do to support your loved one can go a long way on the road to recovery.

**Helping a Co-Worker**

If you think a co-worker may be experiencing mental illness, it can be hard to decide on a course of action. After all, you may not know the colleague well enough to feel comfortable talking about such a personal matter. Before you talk to anyone, consider:

- **Speaking to a manager or supervisor**, who may have received specialized training to deal with these situations and can offer the appropriate resources and support.

- **Treading carefully.** Discussing the topic of mental health with a co-worker can be highly sensitive. If you feel you're the most appropriate person to talk about the matter, do it privately to avoid creating a situation where your co-worker feels threatened or attacked. Focus on your concern over his or her well-being, your desire to help and reinforce your colleague's value in the workplace.
- **Offering information on support services.** Your LifeWorks·fgi Employee Assistance Program is a great source for information, advice and professional help. Provide your colleague with any helpful brochures, website addresses or contact information and encourage him or her to get in touch with a physician for diagnosis.
- **Staying tight-lipped.** If your co-worker shares personal information with you, don't disclose or gossip with other workers about it. Instead keep the information you've been entrusted with to yourself. If, however, you're concerned your colleague is a threat to him or herself or could harm others, report information to management or Human Resources immediately.

Approaching a co-worker or loved one to speak about their mental illness can be difficult. Tread carefully, offer information and support, and let the person know that you're there to help, not judge.