Lead with Care: A Supervisor's Guide

Leaders and supervisors play a key role in creating caring, compassionate, stigma-free workplaces; they also have a responsibility under the Occupational Health and Safety Act and related policies to maintain safe work environments. As part of this responsibility, leaders have a duty to inquire and act when an employee (either faculty or staff) may be demonstrating concerning behaviours that may impact their safety and that of others.

This guide has been designed to highlight steps that leaders can take to lead with care in the workplace. Regardless of the cause of the employee's behaviour, it is important that leaders act from a place of compassion, dignity, and understanding, prioritizing well-being and safety.

When should a leader be concerned about an employee?

The following non-exhaustive list provides examples of concerning behaviours that leaders may observe:

- Significant changes in appearance or actions that seem unusual for the individual
- Notable changes to work quality and attendance
- Expressions of frustration or anger that seem out of character
- Withdrawing or isolating from others
- Overreaction to circumstances and/or low tolerance to frustration
- Noticeable smell of substances, such as alcohol or drugs
- Physical symptoms that may include unsteady gait, reduced coordination, or slurred speech
- Engaging in unsafe work practices, such as driving erratically or not following safety protocols
- Appearance of being overly nervous, tense, or tearful
- Expression of suicidal thoughts or feelings of hopelessness

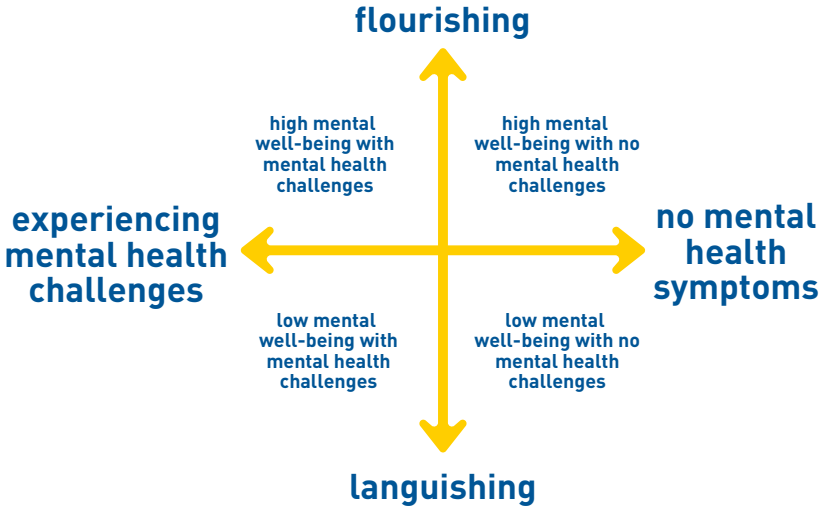
What are some causes of concerning behaviours?

Unusual or concerning behaviour can be caused by a variety of factors, including but not limited to:

- Side effects of medication (e.g. brain fog, nausea)
- Medical conditions (e.g. traumatic brain injury, diabetes)
- Mental/physical fatigue and exhaustion
- Crisis or traumatic experiences (personal and/or work-related, including bullying/harassment)
- Stressful events or personal responsibilities (e.g. caring for an elder)
- Working in extreme hot or cold conditions
- Substance use, including alcohol or drugs
- Mental health concerns/distress

The dual-continuum model of mental health (adapted from Keyes, 2002) on the following page highlights how those with mental illnesses can still experience mental well-being while those without a mental illness can also experience poor mental health. Leaders' responsibility is not to diagnose any issue but to exercise a duty of care to ensure the safety and well-being of employees.

The Dual-Continuum of Mental Health



When determining how to act to support employees with behaviours of concern, regardless of whether the behaviours are related to mental health or illness, leaders should consider the risk to safety and well-being and act accordingly.

How can a leader start a conversation about concerning behaviour?

Every situation is different, but across all circumstances, an emphasis on dignity, well-being, and confidentiality is critical, and leaders should take stock of any assumptions they may have about the individual or cause of the behaviour before acting. The following provides guidance on how leaders can check in with employees whose behaviour may be concerning:

- Approach the employee for a conversation in a private location: *Can we chat somewhere quiet?*
- Discuss your observations and concerns with the employee: *I noticed that you do not seem like yourself today / that you were falling asleep at your computer today / that you were crying this afternoon. I'm concerned about you. Can we talk about what's going on?*
- Listen with an open mind as the employee explains their situation.
- If after an informal check-in, you are concerned about an employee, including if you noticed a pattern of behaviour, document the informal check-in in an objective manner and seek guidance from Human Resources/Academic Labour Relations.

If at any time the employee requests that a union representative be present, stop the conversation and let the employee know you will reach out to Human Resources or Academic Labour Relations.

What are some considerations for safety-sensitive work assignments?

A safety-sensitive role is one in which the actions of the employee may lead to "direct and significant risk of injury" to that person, others, or the work environment (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016). Examples of safety-sensitive roles and tasks include driving, operating machinery or equipment, working at heights, or using sharp tools.

If you have concerns about employee behaviour in a safety-sensitive work assignment, document your observations and contact Health & Safety for guidance.

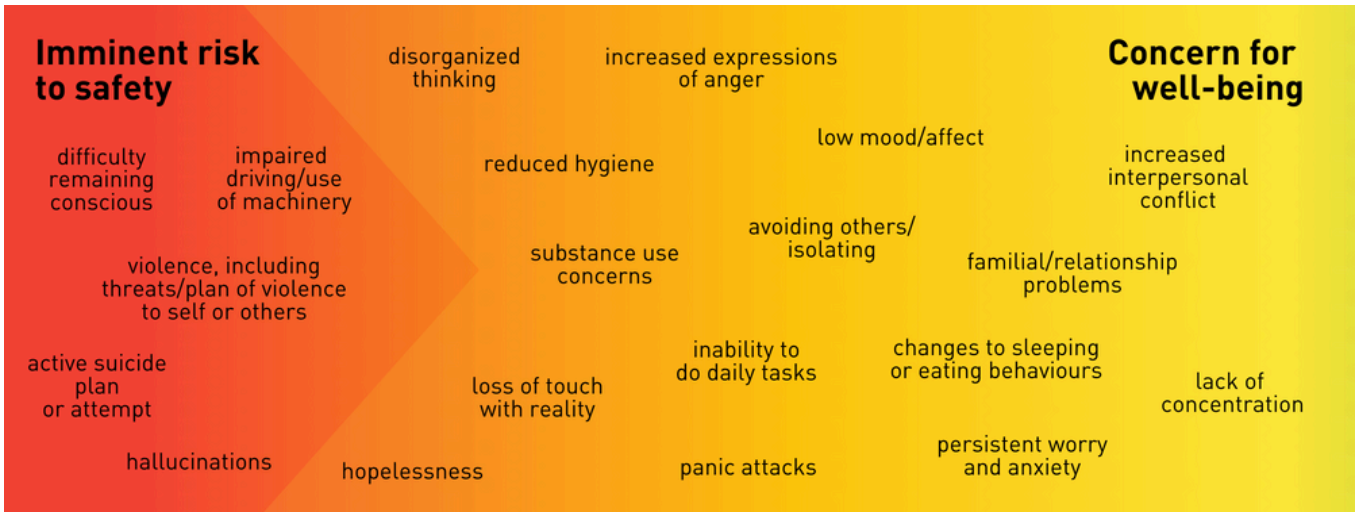
- If the employee is safe to perform some duties and continue working, provide an alternate work assignment that can be done safely and check in with the employee throughout the day to re-assess.
- If the employee is not safe to continue working and is not at risk of harm, arrange for safe transport home. *E.g. Is there someone you trust who can help you get home safely? Would it help if I arranged a taxi for you?*
- If an employee has a work-related incident or injury, report the incident through the Accident/Incident Reporting Process
- If a workplace accommodation is required, consult the Workplace Accommodations Guide and contact the Workplace Accommodations Specialist in Human Resources or for faculty the Director, Office of the Provost and Faculty Recruitment.

What should leaders do in cases of imminent risk of harm?

In case of **imminent risk of harm** in which the individual is no longer able to stay safe or there is risk to the safety of others, immediately seek emergency help. On campus, call the Special Constable Service at **519-253-3000 ext. 4444.** Off campus, dial **9-1-1.** Emergency care can be accessed in-person at Windsor Regional Hospital Emergency Department, **1030 Ouellette Ave.** downtown Windsor. Advise the senior leader in your area, Human Resources/Academic Labour Relations, and document the situation.

The below graphic provides examples of circumstances in which risk is imminent (emergencies) and those in which emergency services may not be necessary but in which leaders still have a duty to inquire with employees regarding their safety and well-being.

It is important to note that although the below provides some general examples, the type of work and context will also contribute to the level of risk (for example, risk is heightened in safety-sensitive positions such as those involving operating machinery or vehicles).



What can leaders do in non-emergency situations?

Leaders do not have to be mental health professionals to enact care and support. A simple informal check-in with an employee can be the first step in connecting them with necessary supports and accommodations to support their well-being. The questions on page five of this guide can help you approach the conversation.

- Discuss with the individual their needs and how these could be addressed, allowing them to lead the process: *E.g. If this has happened before, do you have a plan for coping? What has helped in the past? Is there something that you need or that could help support you? Is there anyone that you would like to contact for support?*
- Offer hope and reassurance: *E.g. You are not alone in handling this. I/We are here to support you.*
- Refer the employee to appropriate resources. *E.g. Would you like me to provide you information on how to connect with the Employee Assistance Program / community resources?*
- Recognize that the individual may need time to follow up on a referral.
- Discuss with the employee your duty of care and who (if anyone) you will be speaking to on their behalf. *E.g. I will connect with the Accommodations Specialist in Human Resources to help set up an accommodation plan that supports you.*
- If a workplace accommodation is required, consult the Workplace Accommodations Guide and contact the Workplace Accommodations Specialist in Human Resources or for faculty the Director, Office of the Provost and Faculty Recruitment to develop an accommodation plan.
- Check in with the employee periodically to ask how they are doing and whether additional supports may be required.

How can leaders care for themselves and set compassionate boundaries?

- Be mindful that supporting employees in crisis and navigating difficult situations can take a toll on everyone involved. As a leader supporting your team, it is important to take time to care for yourself and your own mental health.
- If an employee begins to rely on a leader for a high level of emotional support, they may need to set a compassionate boundary around how much support they are able to provide: *E.g. I care about your well-being and want to make sure you have the best support available. Let me connect you with resources that can offer more specialized help.*
- Strategies for coping and self-care vary for each person but can include breathing exercises, movement, engaging in hobbies or leisure activities, and seeking out mental health resources and supports. For more resources on coping and grounding exercises, visit Skills for Coping and Healing.

Employee Mental Health Resources

- To access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), visit Employee Assistance Program (EAP) | Human Resources (uwindsor.ca).
- For employee and community mental health resources, visit Employee Mental Health Resources.
- For more information on the Employee Mental Health Strategy and updates, visit Employee Mental Health Strategy | Office of the Vice-President, People, Equity, and Inclusion (uwindsor.ca).

Questions to Support Leaders in their Duty of Care

Leaders may wish to use the following questions in non-emergency situations to support them in thinking through their concern for an employee and what steps they will take to the support them:

1. What specific actions or behaviours have I observed that concern me? When did these behaviours occur, and have they been consistent?

2. Am I making any assumptions about the individual or their circumstances? How can I ensure that I approach the situation with empathy and an open mind?

3. How can I start a conversation with the employee about my observations in a way that is non-judgemental, respectful, and compassionate, while ensuring confidentiality?

4. What resources or supports can I offer to the employee? If additional resources or information is needed, who can I reach out to for assistance?

5. What steps can I take to provide ongoing support to the employee? What strategies can I use to check in with the employee regularly to ensure they feel supported and valued?

6. How will I ensure my own well-being while supporting the employee? What self-care strategies can I use, and what resources are available to me for support?

If there is imminent risk to the safety of the employee or others, contact emergency services via 911 or on campus ext. 4444 for emergency contact with the UWindsor Special Constable Service.

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