



DEFEND YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

An R U OK? Conversation guide for Defence personnel

Sometimes the most important thing you can do is ask R U OK?
And sometimes, the person who needs to hear that question is you.

R U OK?[®]

A conversation could change a life.

This resource is part of the Defence and R U OK? 'Defend Your Mental Health' campaign, which empowers and encourages personnel to have open and honest conversations about mental health.

To help ask your peers, "are you OK?" we've developed this practical conversation guide.

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For a long time, I thought being strong meant carrying everything myself. I couldn't have been more wrong.

– Hugo, Army

This resource was developed with the generous support of the Department of Defence with insights kindly provided by members of the Defence Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF).

How conversations can make a difference

Help is available. We can start by asking R U OK?.

Defence service can ask a lot of its people. It shapes how you work, think, and the ways in which we connect with the people around us.

Deployments, relocations, out of hours duties, operational tempo and transition – these are experiences that most Australians may never face, and they carry real weight for members, veterans and our families.

But Defence service also builds something that few other workforces can: genuine community. A sense of community and connection is one of the most powerful protective factors for mental health and wellbeing.

Together, we need to break down the stigma that keep some people suffering in silence and make it clear: you do not have to walk that road alone.

Sometimes the most important thing you can do is simply ask, *R U OK?*. Not like a passing ship in the night – but stopping to ask like someone who genuinely wants to know the answer. Regular, honest conversations can make a real difference.



**Defence life comes with unique challenges
– distance, deployments, and time away from family –
and that makes connection even more important.**

– Emma, APS and Defence spouse

Spotting the Signs that it's time to start an R U OK? Conversation

It won't always be obvious when someone's not doing well. Below are some possible changes that may signal they need extra support.

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Good leadership in Defence isn't just about the mission – it's about knowing your people well enough to notice when something's changed. If you don't know your people when they're okay, you won't recognise when they're not – and that's when you miss your chance to help.

– Maddy, Airforce



WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?

Have you noticed a change in what they're saying? Do they sound:

- Concerned about the future, or that they're a burden (are they talking about not being here, or that people are better off without them?).
- Like they feel helpless, hopeless, worthless or isolated.

WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

Have you noticed a change in what they're doing? Are they:

- More irritable, aggressive, defensive, dismissive; withdrawn
- Tired all the time
- Suddenly overly happy
- Increasing their alcohol or medication use
- Taking more risks
- Making significant and sudden lifestyle changes
- Making less effort: hygiene, appearance, work (presentism, absenteeism)
- Suddenly gaining or losing weight.

I speak to people all the time who are worried about reaching out to someone who looks like they're struggling, because they may not have the answers, or won't know how to fix the problem. In my experience people simply want to feel heard or feel like someone has cared.

– Mark, Navy

“



WHAT'S GOING ON IN THEIR

LIFE?

Is there something going on in their life or at work?

- Changes in relationships or finances
- Injury or illness
- Experienced a recent traumatic event, such as a death of a friend or family member
- Housing/relocation changes
- Posting, role changes or deployment
- Administrative or discipline issues.

Asking someone if they're okay is about connecting with them, not correcting them. You don't need to have the answers – you just need to be real, listen, and help guide them towards support if they need it.

– Mark, APS



If you've noticed a change, no matter how small, trust your gut instinct and ask R U OK?.

Simple, practical tools to help you have a conversation



Getting ready to ask

Before you can look out for others, you need to look out for yourself. Take a moment to self-reflect:

- Am I in a good headspace to listen and have a meaningful conversation with someone else?
- Do I have the time and emotional energy to respond if they share difficult or confronting information?
- Are there any topics they might raise which would make me feel triggered or unable to support?
- How would I benefit from talking to someone or seeking help?

If you are worried about your answers proactive help-seeking is encouraged. Remember, support is available. You can find contact details on page 18.



Be prepared

- Remember that you won't have all the answers (which is OK).
- Listening is one of the most important things you can do.
- If someone is talking about personal struggles they might be emotional, embarrassed or upset.



Pick your moment

- Have you chosen somewhere relatively private and informal?
- What time will be good for them to chat? Ideally try and put aside 30 minutes so the conversation isn't rushed.
- You might find that during breaks, or before/after work are good times to chat.
- If they can't talk when you approach them, suggest another time to have a conversation.
- It might be more comfortable for the person to be side-by-side with you e.g. walking together or driving rather than face-to-face.

I don't remember much of what was said in that conversation, but I remember their body language and their faces so clearly. The way they sat with me, not across a desk – just being there – I still think about that every day.

– Maddy, Airforce

Starting a conversation



- Be relaxed.
- Help them open up by asking questions like "How are you going?" or "What's been happening?" or "I've noticed that you're not quite yourself lately. How are you travelling?"
- Make an observation. Mention specific things that have made you concerned about them, like "I've noticed that you seem really tired recently" or "You seem less chatty than usual. How are you going?"



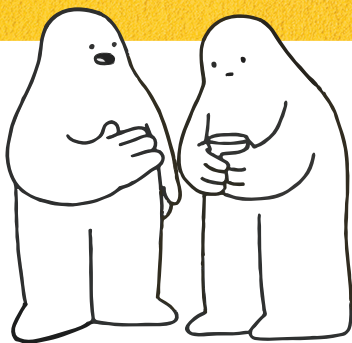
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People are often scared to ask because they don't know what they'll hear – but asking is what creates the chance to help. There's no right or wrong way to start the conversation – just have the courage to ask.

– Mark, APS

What if they don't want to talk to me?

- If they don't want to talk, try not to take it personally. They might not be ready to talk, or it might take them time to process that you're asking in a genuine manner.
- Respect their decision not to talk; don't force them into it or criticise them.
- Focus on some things they might be comfortable talking about like, "I know you've had trouble sleeping and concentrating lately. Can we talk about that?"
- Suggest they talk to someone they trust, like a family member or friend. You could say, "You can always call me if you ever want to chat. But is there someone else you'd rather talk to?"
- Ask if you can check in with them again soon.



When someone asks if you're okay, it doesn't mean you have to talk right then and there – but it does show you the support is there.

– Mark, APS



I'm here to listen if you want to talk more.

Listen with an open mind

- Take what they say seriously.
- Don't interrupt or rush the conversation.
- If they need time to think, sit patiently in the silence and don't rush in with solutions.
- Encourage them to share details of their feelings and experiences.
- If they get angry or upset, stay calm and don't take it personally.
- Let them know you're asking because you genuinely care.
- If you feel it's appropriate, tell them gently about what you've noticed and why you're concerned.



You look for changes in patterns. We're all very good at masking, especially in Defence, so it's not always obvious. But when someone's normal patterns change – even slightly – that's when you know something's going on. It might just be a different tone, a different word, or a shift in how they respond to the usual banter.

– Ian, Army



Encourage action

- Ask: "Where do you think we can go from here?"
- Ask: "What would be a good first step we can take?"
- Ask: "What do you need from me? How can I help you right now?"
- Ask: "Has anything or anyone helped in the past?"
- Once they've opened up, encourage them to access support.
- Offer to sit with them to provide care and support while they make a phone call and speak with a professional.
- Options could include talking to a family member, a trusted friend, their doctor, or a support service within Defence.

Remember: If an ADF member discloses suicidal thoughts or behaviours we must connect them with Garrison Health or advise their chain of command to ensure they are provided with appropriate support to help keep them safe. Walk them there and wait with them. Never keep it a secret.



Supportive colleagues don't always solve your problems. Sometimes they just remind you that you're part of a team and you don't have to carry everything alone.

– Emma, APS



Check in

- Remember to check in again a few days later to see how the person is doing.
- Proactively talk with them about next steps: what emotions or thoughts do they need to notice, what actions will they take, who will they speak to immediately if they feel overwhelmed. If they haven't felt ready to take action, offer encouragement and remind them you're always there if they need a chat.
- Try to reinforce the benefits of seeking professional help and trying different avenues, whilst being sensitive and acknowledging that some people will feel uncomfortable about speaking with a professional or service.
- You could ask, "Do you think it would be useful if we looked into finding some professional or other support?"



The way to make checking in feel natural is for it to already be natural. You can't just show up when something's wrong – people notice that. It has to be something you do all the time.

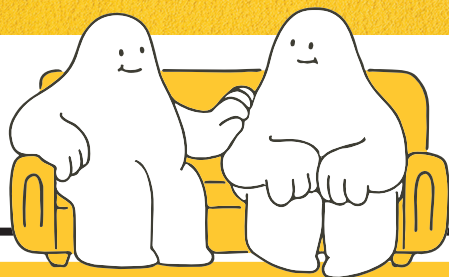
– Ian, Army



What if they say “I’m fine”, but you are still worried?

- Ask again. Phrase your question around care and support. You could say, “It’s just that you don’t seem yourself lately” or “I just want you to know I’m here for you if you need”.
- If they tell you that there’s no concern, don’t push or criticise them.
- Remember that they will open up when they feel safe and supported. Avoid being confrontational or trying to force a response.
- Tell them you’re still concerned about changes in their behaviour and repeat that you care about them.
- Ask if you can check in with them again next week if you’re still concerned.

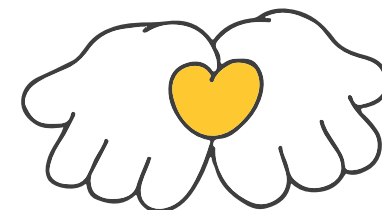
Remember: Defence personnel are required to raise concerns relating to risk behaviours of others to their chain of command to facilitate appropriate support.



“Sometimes the conversation you don’t want to have is the one you need most.”

– Hugo, Army

Managing emotional reactions during a conversation



From time to time, we can face strong reactions during an R U OK? Conversation.

Here are some things you can do to minimise awkwardness and reduce the pressure in these situations:

- Recognise their reaction might be in response to a range of circumstances - some of which you might not know about.
- Allow the person to fully express their emotions (i.e. let off steam) and show them you’re interested by actively listening to all they say.
- Deal with the emotions first, you can discuss concerns more rationally once emotions have been addressed.
- Being a good listener is one of the best things you can do for someone when they are distressed.
- Manage your own emotions by staying calm. Allow them to honestly and openly share their thoughts and experience even if you disagree with their perspective or feel they are being critical of people you care about.



How do I deal with a sad response?

- Sad or tragic incidents are often difficult to deal with because we empathise with the person and feel helpless as we cannot take away their sadness or pain.
- Use lots of empathetic phrases, such as “It sounds like you’re juggling a few things at the moment” or “This must be challenging for you right now.”
- Make sure you’re comfortable with any silence in the conversation.
- Know that silence gives them permission to keep talking and tell you more.
- Encourage them to access appropriate internal supports (see page 18). You can also encourage them to connect with external supports like a friend, family member or appropriate professional.
- If someone begins to cry, sit quietly and allow them to cry. Lowering your eyes can minimise their discomfort. You could add, “Take your time, I’m just going to sit here with you and when you’re ready we can keep talking.”
- If you anticipate this response, it can help to have tissues handy.

How do I deal with an angry response?

- If someone is visibly hostile you can respond with: “I can see that this has upset you. Why don’t you start at the beginning and tell me what is going on.”
- Allow them to identify all the factors they feel are contributing to their anger.

- Be patient and prepared to listen to them talk about everything that’s adding to their frustration.
- To keep the conversation on track and to reassure them you’re interested, try reflecting back what they have said. You could say, “So the thing that’s really upsetting you is (...). Is that right?”
- If they feel they have been wronged or treated unfairly remember that you are unlikely to persuade them otherwise in this conversation. It’s more constructive to listen attentively and provide resources or connect them with formal channels where their specific complaints can be heard.

How do I deal with an anxious response?

- Speak in short, clear sentences while still showing concern and care.
- If you anticipate an anxious response, use your preparation time to think about how you will say what you need to in a clear way.
- Stay calm. This is best displayed through deep, slow breathing, a lower tone of voice and evenly paced speech.



After everything had calmed down, looking back I was easily irritable and quite short with people. I’m normally a people person. I guess I was carrying too much of a load to actively listen to others without sharing my issues.

– Paul, Navy

Support is available

Useful contacts

Support is available through your chain of command, your supervisors, and the following services:

Defence All-hours Support Line (24/7)

1800 628 036

A support line for Australian Defence Force (ADF) members and their families covering a range of services.

Defence Member and Family Helpline (24/7)

1800 624 608

Available 24/7 for information, support and connection with the community.

1800 IMSICK

1800 467 425 (SERCAT 6-7)

Defence Chaplaincy Support (24/7)

1300 333 362

Ask to speak to the on-call Chaplain in your area. A 24/7 regionally based on call service.

Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office

1800 736 776

+61 2 6127 1759 (Outside Australia)

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

1300 687 327

Reserve Assistance Program (RAP)

1300 687 327 (SERCAT 3-5)

Open Arms

1800 011 0146

Veterans & Families Counselling

Lifeline (24/7)

13 11 14

Their nightly text line can also be reached at 0477 13 11 14.

Beyond Blue (24/7)

1300 224 636

Suicide Call Back Service (24/7)

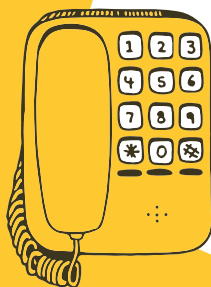
1300 659 467

National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline

1800 250 015

More contacts

ruok.org.au/findhelp



Worried about their immediate safety?

If you believe someone's life is in immediate danger call 000 (Australia only).

If you think someone is having thoughts of suicide, don't be afraid to ask them if they are – asking the question does not lead to suicide. Crisis helplines are there for you too. If you are finding the conversation difficult, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467 who will provide immediate support and advice.

How do I ask?

If you think they are in danger, be prepared to ask directly. "People who feel the way you do may be thinking about suicide. Have you thought about killing yourself?"

If they say yes, the most important things for you to do are to:

- 1 Keep them safe – do not leave them alone
- 2 Get them immediate professional help.

To keep them safe, remove any dangerous items from their physical location, particularly if they have mentioned a suicide plan. If they share with you details of their plan, don't agree to keep these or their suicidal thoughts a secret.

Keep talking and listening to them. Be positive about the role professionals can play in helping them through tough times. You can say things like: "I think it's time to link in with someone who can support you. I can help you to find the right person to talk to." "You're not alone. We can figure this out together." "Who's a person you trust? I would like to call them so we can both help."

Getting them to professional help can start with any of these options: Call a crisis support line together. Go with them to an emergency department. Take them somewhere that feels safe to them but where they won't be alone.



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A conversation could change a life.

ruok.org.au