The Difficult Conversation: When a Colleague May Need Help

Psychologists are trained to have difficult conversations with clients. Talking with a colleague about concerning behavior can feel much harder.

We may worry about damaging a friendship, creating conflict, misunderstanding the situation, or making a colleague feel judged. We may wonder whether the problem is serious enough to say something.

Sometimes saying something early is an important form of professional care.

START WITH THE PURPOSE

Before approaching a colleague, clarify your intention.

The goal should not be to diagnose, lecture, embarrass, or punish.

The goal is to express concern, understand what is happening, and, when appropriate, help the colleague connect with support.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SETTING

Do not raise a sensitive concern in a hallway, group email, social media message, or other public setting. Choose a private setting and allow enough time for the conversation.

USE OBSERVATIONS RATHER THAN LABELS

Instead of saying, You do not seem to be doing well, try:

“I’ve noticed that you have missed several meetings, seem unusually exhausted, and mentioned that you are having trouble keeping up with your caseload. I’m concerned about you.”

Specific observations are easier to discuss than conclusions.

USE "I" STATEMENTS

A simple structure is:

I have noticed...
I am concerned because...
I wanted to check in...
How are things going?

Then listen.

Do not assume you know what is happening. A colleague may be dealing with grief, illness, family stress, burnout, a professional crisis, or something completely different.

OFFER RESOURCES

If appropriate, provide options such as peer consultation, personal therapy, medical care, professional consultation, reduced workload, time away, or the Colleague Assistance Committee.

Do not make yourself the only source of support.

The APA Ethics Code encourages informal resolution of ethical concerns when appropriate and when doing so does not violate confidentiality. Standard 1.04 addresses informal resolution; Standard 1.05 addresses further action when an apparent violation has substantially harmed or is likely to substantially harm a person or organization and informal resolution is not appropriate or has not resolved the matter.

IF YOU ARE THE PERSON RECEIVING THE CONCERN

Being approached can feel embarrassing or defensive, even when the colleague is acting from genuine concern.

Try asking:

“What have you noticed?”
“Can you give me a specific example?”
“Is there something you are worried could be affecting my work?”

You do not have to agree with every observation. Listening can provide information that is difficult to see from inside your own experience.

WHEN INFORMAL SUPPORT IS NOT ENOUGH

Some situations involve immediate safety concerns, serious ethical violations, exploitation, or substantial harm. Those situations may require action beyond a supportive conversation.

A caring profession needs caring colleagues. Sometimes professional collegiality means saying, I am concerned about you, and being willing to stay for the conversation.

Resources: APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, Standards 1.04 and 1.05; North Carolina Psychology Practice Act.

Note: This article is educational and is not legal advice. Psychologists should consult current North Carolina law, Board guidance, and the APA Ethics Code for questions about their individual practice.