



Having helpful conversations

Communicating about sensitive issues like alcohol and drug use can be difficult in the workplace. However, workers' alcohol and drug use may be influenced by work conditions and culture and can impact health and safety.

Managers, supervisors, and team leaders need to:

1. discuss ways to minimise alcohol- and drug-related risk in the workplace
2. identify workers who may be:
 - experiencing alcohol- and drug-related problems
 - affected by alcohol and/or drugs while at work
3. respond appropriately to at-risk, vulnerable, intoxicated or aggressive workers.

The best workplace communication strategy is to have regular, informal one-on-one conversations so difficult issues can be dealt with as naturally as possible.

Some workers may not consider their alcohol and drug use to be a work issue.

Others, may feel judged, embarrassed, or angry, especially those experiencing problems with alcohol and/or drug use.

Other workers may ask for help or advice, but you may be worried that you don't have the skills or knowledge to provide accurate information or support. You may be concerned that you will make the situation worse - but you won't.

These thoughts and feelings might stop workers asking for help or stop workplaces offering help.

Communication barriers

To overcome communication barriers:

1. have open and non-judgmental conversations about alcohol and drug use
2. improve your alcohol- and drug-related knowledge, and that of others
3. create a safe and supportive work environment
4. respond appropriately to:
 - at-risk and/or vulnerable workers
 - critical incidents such as intoxicated workers and/or aggressive behaviour (see [How-to-Guide: Critical Alcohol and Drug Situations](#)).



Open, non-judgemental conversations involve:

Verbal and non-verbal language	What you and workers say (e.g., the words and meaning) How you and workers speak (e.g., body language, tone of voice, gestures, physical space between people, and amount of eye contact)
Interpreting and understanding	Influenced by workers' culture, age, gender, educational level, viewpoints, experiences, effects of current and/or previous alcohol or drug use
Listening	It is more important to listen than to speak. Concentrate on what is being said and allow the worker to explore their problem/perspective without breaking in
Responding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognise that workers use alcohol and drugs for many reasons 2. Provide workers with factual information about the physical, psychological, and social harms that can be associated with alcohol and drug use 3. Promote a workplace culture focused on health, safety, wellbeing, and inclusivity 4. Adopt a neutral position about workers' lifestyle choices, regardless of whether they drink or use drugs or not.

Identifying at-risk or vulnerable workers

Any worker, including managers, team leaders, and supervisors, may encounter problems associated with alcohol and drug use at some stage in their life.

Everyone needs someone to talk to.

As a manager, supervisor, or team leader, you may:

1. be directly approached by a worker to discuss either their or another person's wellbeing, alcohol and drug use, and/or work stressors
2. overhear workers discussing their wellbeing, alcohol and drug use, and/or work stressors
3. notice that a worker's behaviour, mood or appearance has changed.

Speaking about sensitive matters can sometimes be uncomfortable. You can reduce discomfort and anxiety by following the 4 steps below.

Workers may be at-risk or vulnerable if they are:

- struggling with their wellbeing
- experiencing problems with their own and/or someone else's alcohol and drug use
- using alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism
- young and/or new entrants to the workforce/workplace
- recovering from an injury and/or returning to work after a period of leave
- physically and/or mentally impaired
- from a different cultural background.



4 Helpful Conversation Steps

Step 1. Quick Assessment

Use this guide to have a helpful conversation

	YES	NO
1. Is the worker or anyone else in immediate danger?	Go to A	Go to B
2. Is the worker aggressive and/or intoxicated?	Go to A	Go to B
3. Do you have time to speak with the worker now?	Go to B	
4. Is it the 'right time' to have a difficult conversation? For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you both calm and able to listen? Do you have adequate information to help the worker properly? 	Go to B	
5. Has the worker been involved in a workplace accident?	Go to C	

A Follow the How-to-Guide [Critical Alcohol and Drug Situations guidelines](#) if a worker is affected by alcohol and/or drugs, aggressive, suffering an acute medical episode.

B If you feel:

- prepared, calm, have no competing priorities, speak with the worker immediately about your concerns
- unprepared, rushed, and/or stressed, schedule the discussion for a later time.

Then follow steps 2, 3 & 4 (overleaf)

Conversations about alcohol, drugs, and/or wellbeing matters:

- should be considerate, evidence-based, calm, and free from distractions
- may upset the worker.

Have conversations early in the week & check with worker later in the week.

If a worker wants to speak with you, ask:

- 'Are you OK?'
- 'Can you describe what you want to talk about?'
- 'How is everything else going in general?'

Explain that you:

- do not want to rush the conversation
- want to prepare for the conversation so that you can give appropriate support.

For example, say:

'I really want to talk more about this with you. Can we organise another day/time?'

'I really want to hear your feelings about this and see how I can help you. Would it be ok to sit down and discuss it (insert day)?'

If you have identified a vulnerable or at-risk worker, ask:

- 'Are you OK? I have noticed you do not seem your usual self. I would like to discuss this with you and see how I may help. Do you have some time on?'

This conveys you have noticed changes in behaviour and/or attitude and are concerned.

- 'How is everything going? It's been a difficult week/ few weeks. It would be good to catch up on ... (insert day) to chat about how you are coping with things.'

This recognises that it's common to have struggles.

C Follow your workplace incident response policy and procedures if a worker has been involved in a workplace accident or incident. Schedule a meeting post investigation to address alcohol and drug matters.

3



Step 2. Prepare For Your Conversation

	Think	Act
Objectives	<p>Before meeting with the worker, think about:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. why the conversation is important to you or the worker 2. what you want to say and how you will say it 3. what you and the worker may want to achieve from the conversation 4. whether your expectations are realistic 5. if you are the best person to do this 	<p>Briefly write down what you have noticed about the worker's mood, behaviour, and appearance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide facts and specific examples of behaviour
Place	<p>Is the conversation informal? If yes, you may want to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ sit outside in a park ■ go for a walk or drive ■ have a coffee together <p>Think about the room layout:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ sitting next to someone is less threatening ■ sitting opposite someone conveys formality 	<p>Arrange to speak with the worker in a quiet, safe place free from distractions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Silence your phone ■ Turn off your computer screen <p>If you are having the conversation at work, make sure you will not be interrupted</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Place a 'Do not Disturb' sign on the door
Time	<p>How much time will be needed?</p> <p>When is the best time to have the conversation?</p>	<p>Allow workers sufficient time to discuss matters, ask questions, and process information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do not rush the conversation ■ Don't book difficult conversations in between back-to-back meetings ■ Do not have difficult conversations at the end of the working week



Step 3. Talk & Listen

Suggested conversation starters

1. *'Are you OK?'*
2. *'How is everything going in general?' or 'How is everything at work/home?'*
3. *'How are you?' If worker responds with 'fine', follow up with 'how are you really?'*
4. *'You don't seem your usual self. Is there anything going on that I can help you with?'*
5. *'Thank you for asking me to speak with you earlier. Can you please let me know a little more about your concerns?'*

Body language and non-verbal messages

1. Consider your body language and non-verbal messages
2. Adopt a non-judgmental attitude
3. Observe the other person's body language
4. Sit side by side and avoid too much eye contact as it can feel confronting
5. Pay attention to the worker's body language and emotions
6. If workers need time and space to gather their thoughts, have a break and schedule a time to meet again either later the same day or the next day.

Listen and acknowledge

1. Listen carefully and pause
2. Ask open-ended questions that provide clarity and insight into their problems
3. Don't interrupt or ask too many questions. It's more important to listen, nod and acknowledge than to speak
4. Express interest and concern – 'I can see that this is hard for you,' or 'It's OK to be upset about this'
5. Wait through silences if worker needs time to think.



Step 4. Encourage & Connect

Stay calm

If the worker becomes angry or upset, don't take it personally.

If you feel unsafe stop the conversation and continue it at a later date.

1. Summarise your understanding of what the worker has said to you – *'I want to make sure I understand. You said...'*
2. Ask *'How can I help?'*
3. Provide information about support services (see [Getting Help posters](#))
4. Encourage the worker to connect with support services and explain how the workplace can support them (e.g., time off work)
5. Do not make promises that cannot be kept
6. Understand that it can take some time for someone to be ready to see a professional
7. Remember you won't have all the answers, and that's OK
8. Schedule another day and time to check in and make sure the worker is OK now
9. Maintain workers' confidentiality and privacy.

Resources and handouts are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources>.

References are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/references>.