Approach employee mental health concerns with confidence

An employee emails asking for a few minutes with you. You’ve noticed something's off, they’ve been distracted, their performance has declined and they’re just not the same person. How would you respond?

You don’t want to pry, but you also want to help support your worker and get them back on track. The issue may be temporary and require a short-term accommodation, or a more serious situation that requires a longer-term solution. Mental health concerns can range from managing stress, all the way to diagnosable mental health disorders. Either way, the two of you won’t be able to work on solutions until you address the issue and have that conversation.

"Many managers struggle with how to respond to an employee who may have a mental health issue," says WSPS Consultant Janet Carr. "You may be afraid of making things worse, or just not know what to do. It’s tempting to ignore the situation and hope it goes away, but early intervention is always better than waiting until a problem becomes more serious and more difficult to address."

5 ways you can prepare for sensitive conversations

1. **Know your responsibilities**. Organizations are required by law to accommodate people with any type of diagnosed disability - physical or mental - up to the point of undue hardship.
2. **Understand your role**. This involves recognizing when someone is behaving differently (being absent more than usual, less engaged, etc.), knowing what support and resources are available, having a conversation with the person, and exploring possible solutions together."Your role is not to be your employee’s therapist," says Janet. "You're not expected to fix the problem, however it is important to accommodate your employees."
3. **Look at the situation from the perspective of accommodating an injury**. Most workplaces already have a process in place for accommodating physical injuries. Explore how it could be applied to investigating and resolving a mental health injury.
4. **Consider whether workplace conditions may be affecting the employees' mental health**. If one person is struggling, others may be as well. Effective managers create the best possible environment in which employees can perform to the best of their ability. This includes setting realistic goals and prioritizing tasks for an employee who is feeling overwhelmed, providing clear communication and feedback, and saying thanks for a job well done.
5. **Be proactive**. Managers need to feel comfortable having these kinds of conversations so that they can address issues earlier on, focus on solutions, and steer people toward getting help. These are skills that can be learned and practiced.