

# ARE THEY TRIPLE OK?

An R U OK? conversation guide for  
emergency services workers



We're always there to help.  
Let's make sure we help each  
other and ask R U OK?

**R U OK?**<sup>TM</sup>  
A conversation could change a life.



The Pinnacle Charitable Foundation is a major partner of R U OK? and is proud to fund the 'Are they Triple OK?' campaign.

This resource was developed with input and advice from the Centre for Corporate Health and R U OK?'s Emergency Services Workers Advisory Group.

## Why use this?

**This resource is part of the R U OK? 'Are they Triple OK?' campaign which encourages higher levels of peer and social support for current and former emergency services workers and volunteers across Australia.**

To help ask your peers "Are you OK?" we've developed this practical conversation guide which includes information on how to respond appropriately to anyone who says, "No. I'm not OK."



# What's in the guide?

- 1 How conversations can make a difference 5
- 2 The signs it might be time to start a conversation 6
- 3 Simple, practical tools to help you have a conversation 8
- 4 Managing emotional reactions during a conversation 15
- 5 Useful contacts for someone who's not OK 19



## How conversations can make a difference

**We're always there to help. Let's make sure we help each other and ask R U OK?**

### Did you know?

Beyond Blue's nationwide *Answering the Call* study involved 21,014 police and emergency services personnel and found they report suicidal thoughts more than twice as often as adults in the general population and are three times more likely to have a suicide plan.

However, employees with higher resilience and levels of social support reported fewer suicidal thoughts and behaviours, even if they had experienced traumatic events that deeply affected them in their work or were likely to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

A simple way to provide support to your colleagues or those who are former emergency services personnel is by genuinely asking R U OK?

Being prepared to have regular meaningful conversations is one way you can help anyone who may be struggling to feel supported when confronted with challenges at work and in life.



# The signs it might be time to start an R U OK? conversation

It won't always be obvious when someone's not doing so well but these are changes you can look out for that might signal they need some extra support.

## Have you noticed a change in what they're saying?

Do they sound:

- Confused or irrational
- Moody
- Unable to switch off
- Concerned about the future
- Concerned they're a burden
- Lonely or lacking self-esteem
- Concerned they're trapped or in pain

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

Are they:

- Experiencing mood swings
- Dismissive or defensive
- Self-medicating
- Becoming withdrawn
- Changing their online behaviour
- Behaving recklessly
- Unable to concentrate
- Losing interest in what they used to love
- Less interested in their appearance and personal hygiene
- Changing their sleep patterns

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

Have they experienced:

- A violent or traumatic incident
- A change in work circumstances caused by injury or illness
- A change in work or job responsibilities
- Increased pressure from relocation
- Conflict at work
- Additional pressure or stress at work
- Relationship issues
- Becoming a parent
- Major health issues
- Constant stress
- Financial difficulty
- Loss of someone or something they care about

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



# Simple steps to an R U OK? conversation

## Getting ready to ask



**Be ready**



**Be prepared**



**Pick your moment**

## Starting a conversation



**1. Ask R U OK?**



**3. Encourage Action**



**2. Listen**



**4. Check In**

## Getting ready to ask



**Be ready**

- Are you in a good headspace?
- Are you willing to genuinely listen?
- Can you give as much time as needed?



**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 this can be difficult and 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 shifts 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

## Starting a conversation



### 1. Ask R U OK?

- 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?"



## 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.



## 2. Listen with an open mind

- Take what they say seriously
- Don't interrupt or rush the conversation
- If they need time to think, try and sit patiently with the silence and don't rush in with solutions
- Encourage them to explain
- If they get angry or upset, stay calm and don't take it personally
- Let them know you're asking because you're concerned



## 3. Encourage action

- Ask them: "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?"
- Suggest they do something that they know helps them relax or brings them joy e.g. go for a walk, see a movie, have a bath, swim etc.
- Once they've opened up, encourage them to access support or to do something that might make the load a bit lighter
- Good options for action might include talking to family, a trusted friend, their doctor, Employee Assistance Program or an appropriate support service within your agency

## Local contacts

- Record your agency's support services contact details, so you can pass them on. This can include your wellbeing team, Employee Assistance Program etc.:

---

---

- Record an external local health service or helpline here:

---

---

- Record the contact details for an appropriate manager here:

---

---



## 4. Check in

- Remember to check in a few days later to see how the person is doing
- Ask if they've found a better way to manage the situation
- If they haven't done anything, keep encouraging them and remind them you're always there if they need a chat
- Understand that sometimes it can take a long time for someone to be ready to see a professional
- Try to reinforce the benefits of seeking professional help and trying different avenues
- You could ask, "Do you think it would be useful if we looked into finding some professional or other support?"

# What if they say I'm fine?

- Ask again. You could say, "It's just that you don't seem yourself lately"
- If they deny they have a problem, don't criticise them. Acknowledge they're not ready to talk
- Avoid a confrontation
- Examples of how you could respond to their denial include "It's OK that you don't want to talk about it but please call me when you're ready to chat" or "Is there someone else you'd rather talk to?"
- Tell them you're still concerned about changes in their behaviour and you care about them
- Ask if you can check in with them again next week if you're still concerned
- If you're worried about them, reach out to someone else close to that person to see if they have noticed the changes you have or whether they have concerns. You can encourage them to also check in

# 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:

- Be prepared
- Recognise their reaction might be in response to a range of circumstances - both personal and work related - 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 the issues 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 and not taking things personally



# How do I deal with sadness?

- 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 “I understand 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 support, such as talking to the EAP, an appropriate support service or a manager. You can also encourage them to connect with external support 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, “I’m 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 anger?

- 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 I need to know...”
- Allow them to identify all the factors they feel are contributing to their anger
- You might encourage them by adding “Right, I understand that (...) is a problem. What else is causing you concern?”
- 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 in all they have to say, 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 you are unlikely to persuade them otherwise in this conversation. It’s more constructive to listen to all they have to say and provide resources or connect them with formal channels where their specific complaints can be heard





## How do I deal with anxiety?

- 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

## Useful contacts for someone who's not OK

Encourage them to call on these Australian crisis lines and professionals:

### Beyond Blue (24/7)

1300 224 636  
beyondblue.org.au

### Lifeline (24/7)

13 11 14  
lifeline.org.au

### Suicide Call Back Service (24/7)

1300 659 467  
suicidecallbackservice.org.au

### SANE Australia:

1800 18 SANE (7263)  
sane.org

### Mensline (24/7)

1300 78 99 78  
mensline.org.au

### More contacts:

ruok.org.au/findhelp

# RUOK?™

A conversation could change a life.

**[ruok.org.au](http://ruok.org.au)**



This resource was developed with the  
generous support of the Pinnacle Charitable Foundation