

ARE THEY TRIPLE OK?

**An R U OK? conversation guide for
family and friends of police and emergency
services workers and volunteers**



RUOK?TM

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 FBG Group and R U OK?'s
Emergency Services Workers Advisory Group.

Why use this?

The R U OK? 'Are they Triple OK?' campaign encourages higher levels of support from peers, family and friends for current and former emergency services workers and volunteers across Australia.

This practical conversation guide is designed to help those family and friends ask, "Are you OK?" and know how to respond appropriately if the answer is, "No. I'm not OK."



What's in the guide?

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How conversations can make a difference

Family and friends are often the first to notice when someone they care about is struggling. The best thing you can do is ask, “Are you OK?”

Even the most resilient police and emergency services personnel can be affected by stress and trauma related to their work, as well as other life challenges.

However, employees and volunteers who reported strong social support mechanisms, maintaining healthy levels of physical activity, and obtaining regular good sleep, had higher levels of wellbeing.

As family and friends of emergency services personnel, you can support those you care about by genuinely asking, “Are you OK?”

Doing something is always better than doing nothing and being prepared to have a meaningful conversation with a family member or friend who may be struggling is a way you can help them feel supported when they're confronted with challenges at work and in life. Giving someone a lot of time and space might not help them work through their difficulties.

Starting a conversation when you first notice changes in what they are saying or doing can lead to better support and wellbeing outcomes for those you care about.

Did you know?

Police and emergency services personnel have higher rates of psychological distress, higher rates of diagnosis of mental health conditions, and higher rates of suicidal thinking and planning than the general adult population in Australia.¹

Reference: 1. Beyond Blue Ltd. (2018). Answering the call national survey, National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services – Final report.

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

Changes in how someone is thinking, feeling and behaving could be a sign someone is experiencing a mental health or wellbeing issue. When the person is not in work mode, family and friends are often the first to notice these signs or symptoms. Although, it's not always obvious when someone's not doing so well, there are changes you can look for that might signal they need some extra support.

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

Are they:

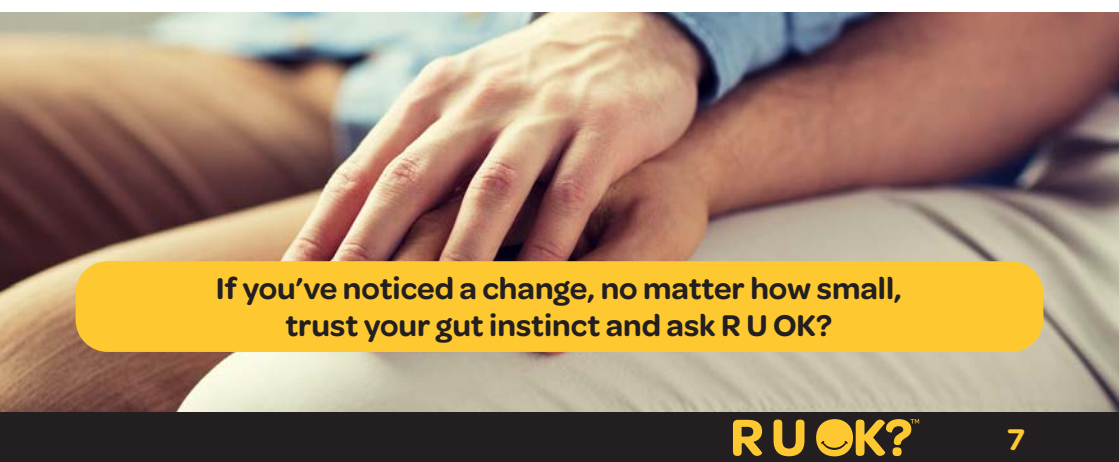
- Confused or irrational
- More negative or pessimistic
- Experiencing mood swings
- Unable to switch off after work
- Unable or unwilling to make simple or any decisions
- Becoming withdrawn from family or avoiding social events
- Concerned about the future
- Losing interest in hobbies or activities that they used to love
- Concerned they're a burden
- Quick to overreact or become irritable
- Increasing their alcohol consumption
- Lonely or lacking self-esteem
- Concerned they're trapped or in pain
- Dismissive or defensive
- Self-medicating
- Changing their online behaviour
- Behaving recklessly

- More forgetful
- Unable to concentrate or feeling tired
- Less interested in their appearance and personal hygiene
- Changing in their sleep patterns and/or eating habits
- Less able to cope with daily activities

Have there been other changes?

Have they experienced:

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



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

Getting ready to ask



Be ready

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



Make a plan

- You could let them know in advance that you would like to discuss something important and set aside some time clear of distractions
- Decide what you would like to say ahead of time – you might like to write down a few key points
- Determine how you will have the conversation – face to face is preferable, but if that's not possible, you could have the conversation via phone or video chat.





Be prepared and understand your role

- Do you understand that your role is to listen and that you may not be able to solve their problems?
- 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



Choose the right moment

- Have you chosen somewhere safe? A location free from interruptions or distractions, and where they will feel comfortable is ideal
- When is a good time for them to chat? It might be better to talk to them on a day off rather than when they arrive home from work
- Do you both have enough time to chat? Ideally try and put aside at least 30 minutes so the conversation isn't rushed
- 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
- Are you both in the right mindset? Try to have the conversation when you are both calm, free from immediate pressures and when you are able to focus on listening and being supportive.





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

- If they don't want to talk, try not to take it personally. It might be hard to hear that they don't want to talk to you, especially if you have a close or partner relationship. However, they might not be ready to talk or it might take them time to process and understand that you genuinely want to know how they're feeling
- Respect their decision not to talk; don't force them into it or criticise them
- Focus on some things they might be more comfortable talking about such as: "I know you've had trouble sleeping and concentrating lately. Can we talk a bit about that?"
- Suggest they talk to another family member or friend they feel comfortable opening up to. You could say: "I'm always here if you ever want to chat but is there someone else you'd rather talk to?"
- They may feel more comfortable talking about work-related events with a colleague. It may help to encourage them to open up to a workmate they trust if they're not ready to talk to you
- Ask if you can check in with them again soon
- Be patient, you might have to ask a number of times before they are ready to talk.

Starting a conversation



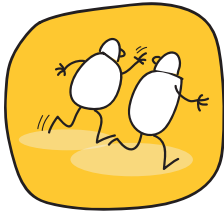
1. Ask R U OK?

- Be relaxed
- Help them open up by asking questions like "How are things going at work?" or "I've noticed that you're not quite yourself lately. Is there anything on your mind that I can help you with?"
- Make an observation. Mention specific things you're concerned about, like "I've noticed that you seem really tired lately" or "You seem easily frustrated at the moment. How are you going?"
- Let them know you are having the conversation because you care about them and their wellbeing.



2. Listen with an open mind

- Take what they say seriously and validate their experience. For example, "That must have been a really upsetting job to go to"
- Don't minimise their experience and keep the focus on them
- Don't interrupt or rush the conversation
- If they need time to think, try and sit patiently with the silence and don't jump in with your solutions
- Encourage them to explain:
 - "What's been happening?"
 - "Have you been feeling this way for a while?"
 - "So, what was that like?"
 - "That's tough. Keep talking, I'm listening."
- If they get angry or upset, stay calm and don't take it personally.



3. Encourage action

- Once they've opened up, encourage them to access support or to do something that might lighten the load
- 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?"
- Suggest they do something they know helps them relax or brings them joy e.g. go for a walk, see a movie, have a bath, go for a swim, spend time with friends or family etc.
- Some good options for formal or informal action include talking to another family member or trusted friend, their doctor, an external professional support service, the Employee Assistance Program or another appropriate support service within their agency such as a peer support program
- Some people might be hesitant to seek professional support if they've tried that before and haven't had a positive experience. It might be helpful to mention that finding a professional suited to their needs and who is the right 'fit' might take some time.



4. Check in

- Remember to check in again a few days later, or sooner if you think you need to, and see how they're 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
- Reinforce the benefits of seeking professional help and trying different avenues for support
- You could ask, "Do you think it would be useful if we looked into finding some professional help 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, and let them know that's OK
- Don't let your chat escalate to an argument
- Examples of how you could respond to their denial include: "It's OK that you don't want to talk about it but please let me know 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 worried about them, reach out to someone else close to them and ask if they've noticed the same changes or have concerns.

What barriers might there be to them having a conversation?

If your family member or friend is hesitant to open up about their difficulties, you might encounter some barriers when you ask the question. Some possible reasons are:

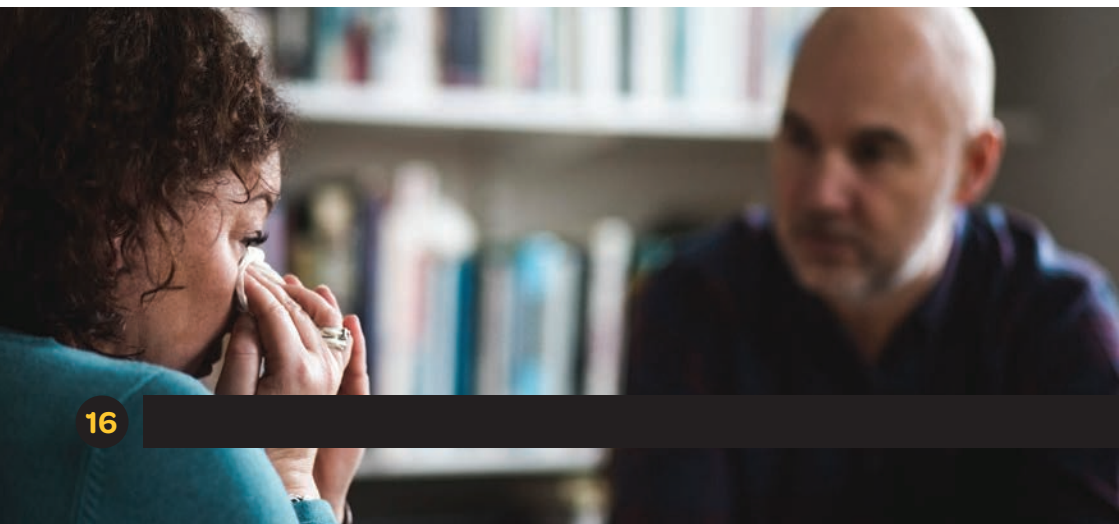
- They might feel that opening up to you will put their burden onto you, and they might want to avoid that
- By admitting they're struggling with work issues, they might think they're letting you down
- Due to the nature of their work, they might be reluctant or unable to disclose details or discuss reactions to their experiences (to protect confidentiality)
- Emergency services roles include exposure to confronting situations and many workers pride themselves on their resilience and ability to cope with these challenges. Recognising their resilience is wavering or that they're in a more vulnerable state might be hard for them to accept
- They might feel you won't understand their situation or be able to support them with something they think you can't relate to.



Managing emotional reactions during a conversation

Sometimes an R U OK? conversation can bring on strong emotions. If this happens there are some things you can do to minimise any awkwardness and ease the pressure:

- 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 your support by actively listening to all they say
- Give space to their emotions; you can discuss issues more rationally once emotions are calmed
- Being a good listener is one of the best things you can do for someone when they're 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 if we cannot take away their sadness or pain
- Use a lot of empathetic phrases such as: “It sounds like you’re juggling quite 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 your silence is giving them permission to keep talking and tell you more
- Encourage them to access appropriate support such as talking to the EAP, an appropriate support service or a manager. You can also encourage them to connect with external support through another friend or family member or appropriate health professional
- If someone begins to cry, sit quietly and allow them to cry. Lowering your eyes can minimise their discomfort. You might say: “I’m going to sit here with you and when you’re ready we can keep talking”
- If you anticipate an emotional 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 about (...)”
- 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’ve said. You could say: “So the thing that’s really upsetting you is (...) Is that right?”
- If they feel they’ve been wronged or treated unfairly you’re 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 to clearly say what you need to say
- Stay calm. This is best displayed through deep, slow breathing, a lower tone of voice and evenly paced speech.



What else can you do to help?

Whether they are ready or not ready to talk, you can still support healthy self-care habits at home or in their personal time and this can improve wellbeing and increase social connection:

- Support them to exercise regularly
- Promote healthy eating
- Help establish good sleep habits
- Encourage activities that bring enjoyment
- Support spending quality time with family and friends.

Worried about their immediate safety?

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.

It's not an easy question to ask, so if you don't feel confident, a good first step is to call a crisis helpline to seek some immediate advice – see page 23 for a list of available services.

How do I ask directly if they're having thoughts of suicide? You might say something like: "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 immediate professional help for them.

To keep them safe, remove any dangerous items from their physical location, particularly if they have mentioned a suicide plan.

If they share details of their plan with you, 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 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:

- Calling a crisis support line together
- Going with them to a hospital emergency department
- Taking them somewhere that feels safe to them but where they won't be alone.



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



Looking after yourself

A part of looking out for others is also looking after yourself and your needs. Be mindful of your own wellbeing when you are supporting someone else. If you need support, in addition to the organisations listed in this guide, there might be other agency based or state Government wellbeing support initiatives and services available to you.

For more information or support:

Head to Health

This Australian Department of Health site provides a range of digital resources for those supporting others, as well as for yourself as a carer (including informal carers).

headtohealth.gov.au

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ruok.org.au



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generous support of the Pinnacle Charitable Foundation