

# The Wizard of O.A.R.S.

a **framework** to address **mental health** in the workplace



Oars bring balance, stability and give direction to a boat. So too can people give support and guidance to those around them who may be facing mental health issues. The following steps may not work like magic immediately, but they will gradually, over time, make a difference.

**The most difficult and awkward moment when approaching a co-worker or employee will be when you initiate the discussion. There are typically three situations, the individual may be:**

- aware of the issue, dealing with it but not ready to directly disclose or accept assistance at that time
- not aware of the issue (either has not been diagnosed or accepted the diagnosis) so is not willing to disclose or accept assistance
- aware of the issue, dealing with it and are ready to disclose and accept assistance

In all cases, letting the person know you care and that you're willing to listen and support them without judgement can open the door for discussion. When you've begun the dialogue, encourage the person to approach you as they are ready.

The following suggestions are for non-urgent situations. If you feel the individual is at risk of harming themselves or others, immediate care should be sought at the nearest emergency ward. If the individual refuses help and is actively suicidal or at risk for harming others, the police should be called to assist. Please consult your company policy and guidelines.

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a **framework** to support a colleague facing  
mental health issues in the workplace

**O**bserve – changes in behaviour, length present

**A**pproach + **L**isten – discuss concerns in terms of behaviour. Focus on actions

- I've observed that or I see that... (i.e.: you're not joining us for lunch any more or you've been missing meetings or you've had more accidents lately)
- I'm concerned... (i.e.: you don't seem like yourself or you seem to have less energy than usual)
- How can we support you at work to help improve things for you or What can we do to improve things at work for you? ...
- Then...**ACTIVELY LISTEN** (Here's a [short video on active listening](#))

**R**efer – to resources in the workplace and/or community.

(i.e. EAP, counselling, support groups, etc.) Please visit the resource page to download a [Mental Health Resource Guide](#) for additional tools.

**S**upport – as best as you can

**N**otes:

# APPROACH, LISTEN + SUPPORT

## When you **Approach, Listen and Support...**

- Respect their privacy; speak with them discreetly
- Let them take the lead, but keep letting them know you are interested and supportive
- During initial discussion, make remarks as casual as possible; focus on building trust and rapport
  
- Speak in calm, quiet tones
- Focus on one subject at a time
- Listen without judgment, making assumptions or fixing
- Encourage vs. coddle (not enabling 'illness' behavior but get people into action to work collaboratively to problem solve about what they need)
  
- Mirror & validate (active listening)
- "It sounds like you may be feeling..."
- **Key:** "Did I get that right?"
- "That makes a lot of sense to me."
- Be patient and wait

## Notes:

# APPROACH, LISTEN + SUPPORT

## OTHER KEY POINTS:

- You are not there to diagnose, but instead voice concern
- Don't assume it is a mental illness
- Ask if they have noticed the shifts
  
- Have local resources to refer them to (appropriate manager or department, EAP, local mental health centre, local CMHA branches and support groups)
- Let them know if there is a mental health condition, work accommodations are possible and part of their rights as an employee
- Remind them assistance is available and can be extremely effective, especially when intervention is early
  
- Suggest they contact their primary healthcare provider or local mental health team
- If appropriate, help them find the proper contact numbers, make an appointment and determine how they will get to the appointment
- If they are already seeing a mental health professional, encourage them to let their healthcare professional know of the changes that have been noticed and to follow their guidance

## Remember this process:

- IS a process
- Takes time
- Multiple conversations
- Not a one-time intervention
- Is about trust & rapport building