The Wizard of O.A.R.S.
a framework to address mental health in the workplace

Oars bring balance and 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 immediately, but they will gradually, over time, make a difference.

When you need to talk to someone who you think may be struggling with a mental health condition, it can be uncomfortable and unclear as to how to go about it effectively. Often then managers and supervisors post-pone or avoid these conversations.

Additionally, sometimes when people are dealing with mental health issues, they aren't ready to admit it to others or themselves. This can lead people to refuse assistance or acknowledge the problems directly.

If left unaddressed, behavior resulting from mental illness may cause difficulties at work and result in discipline, termination or other negative workplace consequences. As a manager, co-worker or ally you can be proactive and discuss the behaviour with the person before it escalates into discipline or termination. The earlier you speak with someone, however uncomfortable this may be, the higher the chance for optimal outcomes. Early conversations also offer the best opportunity to prevent a condition (if present) from escalating or becoming chronic.

Letting the person know you're willing to listen without judgement, support them and problem solve can open the door for discussion. When you've begun the dialogue, encourage the person to approach you as they are ready and reach out for appropriate help.

The O.A.R.S. framework is 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 policies and guidelines.

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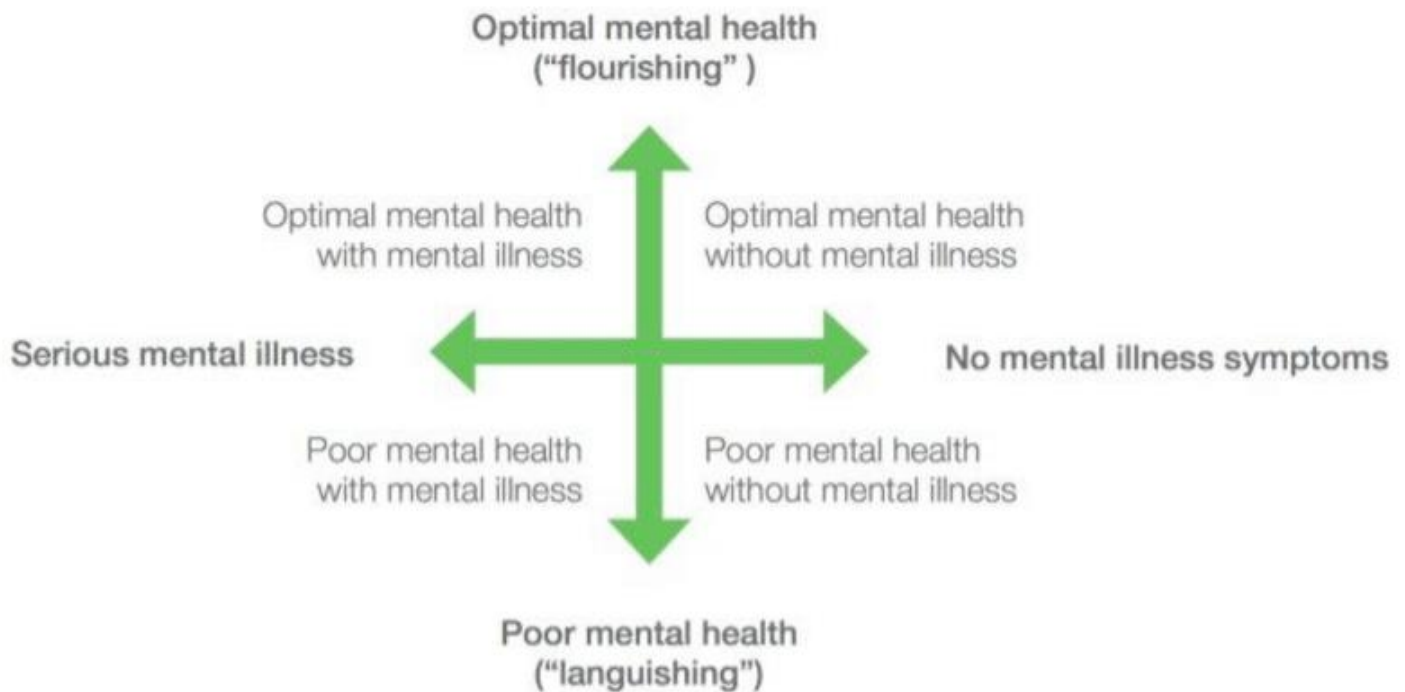a framework to support a colleague facing mental health issues in the workplace

Observe

Ask + Actively Listen

Refer

Support

Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health

Optimal mental health
("flourishing")

Optimal mental health
with mental illness

Optimal mental health
without mental illness

Serious mental illness

No mental illness symptoms

Poor mental health
with mental illness

Poor mental health
without mental illness

Poor mental health
("languishing")

Mental Health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life…"

Mental Illness "refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders - health conditions that result in the significant impairment of an individual's (life)…"

OBSERVE, ASK + ACTIVELY LISTEN, REFER + SUPPORT:
DO'S + DON'T'S...

DO...

- Set the conversation up for success
- Check in with yourself: is it a good day for YOU to speak to them?
- Check in: is it a good day for THEM?
- Play it out: where, why now, how, what will you say, what might they say, how will you respond?
- Have the facts: make sure the facts you have are correct
- Determine your objective
- Focus on building trust, rapport, safety + open dialogue so they feel free to talk

- Speak to them as early as possible
- Document behavior changes + note impact
- Be clear about what you need from them
- Prepare for own internal emotional reactivity
- Plan + prepare for resistance
- Listen without judgement
- Use an icebreaker

DON'T...

- Avoid talking about impact of behavior
- Make assumptions about the behavior or jump to conclusions
- Interrupt
- Minimize or dismiss feelings
- Try to fix or offer advice
- Enable

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Observe – changes in behaviour, length present + document

Ask + **A**ctively Listen– discuss concerns in terms of behaviour, its impact + needs
- I've noticed lately 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) Is everything ok?
- I'm concerned… (i.e.: you don't seem like yourself) How are things going with you?
- What do you need that we might be able to provide?

  Ask open-ended questions
- What do you mean by {blank}?
- Tell me more.

  Mirror + validate
- It sounds like you may be feeling...
- Did I get that right?
- That makes a lot of sense to me.

  Be Patient + wait
  Be curious
  Discuss impact of behavior
  Focus on collaborative problem solving + actions

  Everybody Loves Raymond using Active Listening video: http://tiny.cc/618jyy
  Here's a short video on active listening: http://tiny.cc/t28jyy

Refer – to resources in the workplace and/or community.

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

Support – continue to communicate and encourage; find agreement + set healthy objectives

Sources:
- "Helping Troubled Co-Workers" + "Resolving Workplace Issues" (Mary Ann Baynton, 2011)
(https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/pdf/Helping_troubled_coworkers.pdf)
- "Mental Health in the Workplace" PPT (Seema Lamba, Public Works + Government Services Canada, 2013)
- Theo Jones, EOAP Counsellor, Western Region
- APA
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Mental Illness + Mental Health: Two Continua Model Across the Lifespan, Westerhof + Keyes Adult Dev Jun 2010
- Mount Alison University New Brunswick: https://www.mta.ca/Community/Student_services/Health_and_wellness