

Health and Well-Being Tools

Four Steps to Help a Colleague in Distress



Managers, human resources team member or occupational health and safety representative

Key terms

aangajugasuarniq: Problematic substance use.¹

Elders: Important Knowledge Keepers who play essential roles in ensuring cultural continuity. They are respected as leaders, teachers, role models, mentors, and healers.

Knowledge Keepers: Recognized community members with cultural knowledge.

problematic substance use: Substance use that has mild to severe negative impacts on a person. This type of use involves craving (a “strong need to use the substance”), difficulty controlling use, compulsion (an urge), and consequences (“continuing to use the substance despite negative outcomes”).²

Steps to support a colleague

1. Recognize the signs

- Look for changes in a colleague’s behaviour, such as missing work or being very frustrated or withdrawn.

2. Prepare for the conversation

- Review supportive conversation prompts for topics you want to cover, like aangajugasuarniq (problematic substance use), stress, and struggles with mental health, which can also be related to burnout.
- Understand that colleagues may not open up in the first conversation. They may come back to you later.

- Ensure you have access to relevant crisis and general mental health supports. You may want to edit and print the information in our ***Isumansungittuq (Crisis) Supports*** and ***Resources for General Mental Health and Problematic Substance Use*** tools.

3. Respond respectfully

- Relocate to a private setting and express your sincere concern.
- Share your observations about changes in behaviour. Avoid adding your opinion about why this is happening. You can say, “I’ve noticed you don’t seem like yourself, so I thought I’d check in.”
- Listen actively and confirm you’ve heard what they’ve shared. Note that support does not need to involve giving advice.
- Highlight strengths you see in them, like their courage.
- Address any workplace safety issues.

4. Refer to resources

- Discuss the supports they are looking for (not the ones you feel they need or will get them to the outcome you desire for them).
- Share the kind of support you can provide, including the resources provided in this toolkit. You may also know of respected community members and cultural resources you can share, including speaking with Elders or Knowledge Keepers, or connecting with ceremony.
- Connect with emergency resources or follow community protocols if you are concerned for their physical safety.

1 Laurence J. Kirmayer and others, *Inuit Concepts of Mental Health and Illness: An Ethnographic Study* (Montréal: Jewish General Hospital and McGill University, January 1997), 126, <https://www.mcgill.ca/tcpsych/files/tcpsych/Report4.pdf>.

2 Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, “4. Understanding Substance Use Disorders and Problematic Substance Use,” in *Reducing Cannabis Harms: A Guide for Ontario Campuses* (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2018), <https://campusmentalhealth.ca/toolkits/cannabis/cannabis-substance-use/understanding-disorders-problematic/>.