



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# Signs of distress and how to get help and offer support

**How to identify signs of distress and how to get help and offer support to your team.**

## How we define distress

Distress is a response when we feel we're under threat. It's characterised by emotional pain and a breakdown of previously adequate coping mechanisms.

It can assist to protect our wellbeing and is something yourself or most people in your team will experience at some point. These experiences can be personal or work-related.

For example, people can experience distress in response to:

- unmanageable heightened or ongoing stress
- physical health conditions like serious disease, chronic pain or injury
- mental health conditions like anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder
- experiencing or witnessing traumatic events
- losing a loved one
- losing your job or going through financial difficulties
- experiencing or witnessing negative behaviours, such as racism, discrimination and violence.

## Signs of distress to look out for

Distress becomes a problem when it's prolonged and becomes too overwhelming.

Here are some early signs of distress to look out for in yourself or others:

- Changes in mood like mood swings, sadness, anger, anxiety or lack of motivation.
- Withdrawal from social interactions at work and less participation in meetings or discussions.
- A change in work performance, an increase in errors or forgetting tasks and details.
- Physical symptoms like headaches, muscle tension, fatigue and changes in appetite or sleep patterns.
- Increased absenteeism, coming in late or leaving early.
- Increased conflict with colleagues.

## Managing distress

### Managing your distress

No matter the source of your distress, you can take practical steps to help you cope and feel better. These can include:

- identifying any triggers or causes of your distress
- recognising your emotional experience and being kind and patient with yourself
- keeping a wellbeing toolkit on hand, such as the VPSC [Wellbeing toolkit](#)
- addressing the cause of the distress, if possible

Whenever you cannot address or manage distress, it is important to seek help and support.

### How to support a colleague in distress

If you're concerned about someone at work there are practical things you can do to support them.

Providing support when someone is showing early signs and symptoms of distress is important. It can help them return to their usual performance and prevent mental harm and injury.

If you feel comfortable doing so, the first step is to discuss your concerns with the person and offer support.

For example, you can follow these steps:

1. Check-in with them and ask if they're okay or would like to talk.
2. Listen and acknowledge their experience.
3. Offer to provide help or support, for example you could offer to help them find resources.
4. Encourage them to seek professional support and help.

If a colleague tells you they're experiencing distress, you should encourage them to speak with their manager or contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider. They can help them access the right support and formally raise issues if needed.

## Tips and resources you can use:

- [Managing distress](#), VPSC Wellbeing toolkit
- [Providing Mental Health First Aid to a Co-Worker](#), Mental Health First Aid.

## How to be a supportive manager

As a manager, you play a key role in identifying signs of distress in your employees.

When your employees feel safe, they're more likely to speak up when something is wrong.

The warning signs of distress are different for everyone. If you notice a change in a team member, you should address it early.

It's not your responsibility to diagnose or counsel an employee. But you should offer support and make any reasonable adjustments they need to continue to work.

For example, you can follow these [steps from our Wellbeing Toolkit](#):

1. Plan your conversation and prepare before you speak about any issues.
2. Don't ask for all the details right away. Be slow and gentle.
3. Practice active listening or hold space for them if they're not ready to talk. Focus on what they're saying and show empathy.
4. Help them explore their options and focus on things that are in your or their control.
5. If you don't think you can deal with the issue on your own, you should offer other

support options.

## Tips and resources you can use:

- [Mental health conversations for people leaders](#), Innovation Network
- [How to talk to someone about their wellbeing](#), VPSC Wellbeing Toolkit
- [Managing distress](#), VPSC Wellbeing toolkit
- [Mental Health First Aid Guidelines](#), Mental Health First Aid international.

## Getting help and support

If you are feeling distressed, it's normal to get help. Getting the right help early can support your mental health and wellbeing.

Whether it's for a personal or work-related issue, it's important to ask for help when you need it.

You can ask for help and support, or encourage a team member or colleagues to get help from:

- a doctor or another health professional
- family and friends
- colleagues
- your manager
- the Employee Assistance Program provided in your workplace
- [Beyond Blue online support](#) or by phone on 1300 22 4636
- [Lifeline online support](#) or by phone on 13 11 14.