

Stress/Distress Indicators

What is an indicator?

Indicators are signs that create suspicion in the mind of an observer that a person may need support.

These signs or 'indicators' can be singular or in clusters and may be personally observed, disclosed by the person themselves or be information received from a reliable source, and then possibly confirmed by a third party.

These indicators can present in a number of ways, ranging from general non-specific indicators when 'the person is just different', to the more specific categories of verbal, mental, emotional, physical and behavioural. The following are some examples of indicators you may observe.

Verbal Indicators

- Very closed and uncommunicative
- Expressing feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and inadequacy to handle life – feeling like a loser
- May continually refer to a 'friend' as having problems.

Statements such as:

- "What's the point? Things are never going to get any better" (no future).
- "It's all my fault, I'm to blame" (guilt).
- "I can't take this anymore" (escape).
- "I'm on my own ... no-one cares" (alone).

- "It can't be fixed... It'll never be the same again" (damaged).
- "Nothing I do makes a bit of difference, it's beyond my control" (helpless).
- Talking about suicide or death.

Mental Indicators

- Confusion
- Poor concentration and attention
- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Disorientation of place and time
- Obsessive focus on the event
- Difficulty remembering the event
- Inability to adapt to change
- Inability to understand their reaction to the event
- Writing thoughts - sometimes written comments are veiled, or couched in subtle terms or indirect comment.

Emotional Indicators

- Feeling worthless – useless
- Anxious
- Fearful
- Panic attacks

- Guilt
- Inconsolable grief
- Anger – angry outbursts
- Frustration
- Numbness
- Irritability
- Crying
- Unresponsiveness
- Hysteria
- Loneliness
- Low self-confidence
- Overwhelming sadness
- Demonstrating consistently the symptoms of being depressed.

Physical Indicators

- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Nausea
- Diarrhoea
- Loss of appetite or over eating

- Pain
- Heightened sensitivity to sound
- Loss of interest in hygiene or appearance
- Loss of sexual interest
- Loss of interest in normal recreational activities
- Impatience
- Sudden weight gain or loss
- Persistent tiredness or exhaustion for no obvious physical or mental exertion.

Behavioural Indicators

- Self-harming
- Antisocial acts
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol
- 'Black' humour
- Sleep disturbances
- Work absenteeism
- Giving away things that are treasured to them
- Apathy
- Consistently forgetting to take medication that is necessary for wellbeing and longevity of life

- Taking extreme risks that demonstrate little value for own life (e.g. driving at risk).

How do I respond?

Tips on engaging with people who are troubled

The mainstay of communicating with someone is to establish a rapport with them. The benefits are two-fold: Firstly, they will come to understand that there is someone who cares about them and secondly, further critical information can be elicited, which will assist those you may choose to contact in determining the type of intervention or support required.

The following are some suggested 'conversation starters' you could consider using when engaging people who display some of the aforementioned indicators:

- "Are you okay?"
- "How are you coping?"
- "Is everything all right?"
- "I'm a bit worried about you because you haven't seemed yourself lately."
- "I have noticed that you have been doing (state behaviour), is everything ok?"
- "Is there anything I can do to help you?"
- "Do you have people in your life that are supporting you through this time?"
- "I am here for you if you ever want to talk."

It is important that your listening is non-judgemental. You should also consider having some of this conversation in a way that remains relatively private (e.g. not in a loud voice for all to hear).

Do not try to 'fix' them, but do be empathetic (i.e. compassionate and understanding).

Offer support.

Push through their attempts to push you away.

Notify an appropriate person of your suspicions, especially if you consider them to be displaying a critical need for immediate intervention or support.

Support Services

What is available and how to provide information

Some of the questions that may arise for you include:

- Do I simply offer them information so they can engage in 'self-help'?
- o What information do I give them and how do I relay it to them
- If, in my view, this person is seriously struggling and needs immediate intervention or support, what are my options and who do I tell?
- o What will they need to know?
- o How do I tell the person struggling that I need to do this?
- What is available for me?

o I am listening and dealing with these people as best I can, but I feel it is having a negative effect on me.

Your approach to providing information or taking action to support the person will most likely depend on the level of rapport you established with them.

While this often relates to how much information is shared with you, in some instances the person can be suffering so much that they share information irrespective of your efforts to establish a rapport, i.e. they just 'blurt it out' to anyone who is around them. This is generally indicative of someone who may need professional support or assistance, more than simply someone to talk to.

Self-Help Option

Mensline Australia <https://mensline.org.au> 1300 789 978

Beyondblue <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/whodoesitaffect/men>
1300 224 636

Lifeline <https://lifeline.org.au> 13 11 14

Suicide Call Back <https://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au>

1300 659 467

When you believe the indicators show that there is a sense of urgency in relation to support then you should consider the following:

Immediate intervention necessary.

If the person has made a direct or implied threat of suicide or self-harm, then you should contact the Police on 000 to report your

observations and what was said. The police will attend and support the person with the assistance of trained mental health practitioners at a hospital.

Not urgent but their behaviour indicates professional help should be provided:

Encourage the person to see their GP to talk more about how they are feeling and arrange for further follow up if required, such as a mental health care plan to access psychological support.

In situations where you have significant concerns relating to the wellbeing of a person who has been in contact with you, and there is no direct or imminent threat of suicide or self-harm, you can phone Emergency Triage (24/7) on 13 14 65. This will provide the opportunity to speak with a trained practitioner who will need details of your observations to determine what intervention would be appropriate. This service can arrange for the local Community Mental Health Team to provide some follow up if required. This is a FREE service.

What is available for you?

It is not uncommon for people who find themselves repeatedly dealing with people who are suffering, to start displaying some of the indicators mentioned earlier in this booklet.

On some occasions this even results from a one-off interaction as the issues being dealt with are so significant and they cause great stress to you, the listener.

I encourage you to monitor your own behaviour and assess this against the indicators mentioned earlier so that you are able to engage in the 'Self Help' option.

If you find yourself suffering, the contacts and support identified in this pamphlet are all available to you.

I encourage you to share your feelings with another in your circle of family/friends/work colleagues.

Information taken from “Listening With Purpose: Responding to people in need of support” a booklet developed to support people in the aftermath of the Pinery Fire.

Abby English

Mental Health Clinician (Psychologist)

Inner North Country Mental Health Service