

Try asking: R U OK?

Many of us look forward to the winter holiday season – traveling, spending time with family and loved ones, decorating and gift-giving, hosting or attending celebrations and parties, making and sharing our favorite holiday foods and beverages, and making time to remember and celebrate the reasons for these holidays.

But, for many, the holiday season can also be stressful, lonely or sad. We may be affected by the short days and lack of sunlight, which causes Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) in about 1 in every 10 of us. We may be away from family or a family member may be away from us. We may experience ‘too much’ family. We may have lost a loved one. We may over-commit ourselves. We may be trying to reintegrate into civilian life after being deployed. We may be anxious about the increased social demands or financial pressures. Sometimes the additional stress can be more than a person thinks they can bear.

This holiday season, help a friend, colleague or family member who may be struggling.

“Men sometimes aren’t comfortable reaching out, or think it might be a burden for their friends if they talk openly about life’s challenges,” states the mental health and suicide prevention page of the Movember Foundation’s website (<https://us.movember.com/mens-health/we-need-to-ask>).

“If a guy you know seems to be going through a tough time, they might not talk about it even if they want to. The first step in looking out for them is reaching out.”

This year, give the gift of a conversation. Reach out by asking “Are you okay?” Then listen, encourage action, and check in. “You can’t fix someone else’s problems, but you can be there for them,” says the Movember Foundation (MF). “Sometimes listening is the most helpful thing you can do. You won’t make things worse by asking how he’s doing.”

The MF recommends that before you start a difficult conversation, you should prepare yourself. The website includes tips for each step of the conversation and examples of questions and responses you might use as you follow these four steps:

First, ask the question. “Start with what you’ve seen. You might have noticed that he’s spending more time at the pub, coming into work late, or missing social events. Maybe mention some of the things you’ve noticed about him lately.”

“You might want to try a few different ways to get him talking. How he’s feeling might be because of specific things happening in his life, like changes at work, a break-up, or fatherhood. It can help to give a little, share what’s going on in your own life.

Second, listen. “Listen and let him know you hear what he’s saying. The most important thing is to listen. If he’s open to talking, make sure you don’t interrupt.”

If you're worried he's at risk of suicide: "It's important that you refer him to a professional if you're worried. This may seem daunting, but you won't make things worse by asking directly. Let him know that he's not a burden, and ask him specifically if he's thought about suicide." Here are local (Nebraska) crisis lines: http://dhhs.ne.gov/behavioral_health.

Third, encourage action. "You don't have to know all the answers, but you can explore with him some of the options he might have. You could ask him about the things he used to enjoy, or encourage him to consider talking to others around him. If you think he'd benefit from some more specific information, let him know about resources that are available online. If you think he needs more, encourage him to see a doctor or another professional."

Fourth, check back in with him. "Keep in touch with where he's at and make a plan for the future. Set a reminder for yourself to send him a message or give him a call. You could suggest catching up in-person, grab a bite to eat or do something together. Try not to make vague future plans – pick a time and commit. When you check back in with him, make sure he knows you're there when he needs you."

Recent data gathered in Nebraska shows that there is a need for us to reach out. For example, the spouses and significant others of veterans are significantly more likely than the general population to report depression and poor mental health. In addition, our veterans are significantly more likely to report binge drinking in the last 30 days.

Do you know someone who may be struggling or hurting? Start the conversation. Ask R U OK?

Acknowledgement: The Movember Foundation is a charity that focuses on some of the biggest health issues faced by men worldwide: prostate cancer, testicular cancer, and mental health and suicide prevention. South Heartland District Health Department receives funding originating from the Movember Foundation to work on community supports for mental wellness of our South Heartland veterans, military service men and women, and their families.

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