

Having the conversation

A manager's guide to 1:1s when you think someone is burning out

Why this guide

An early, private conversation does more good than a perfect one that comes too late. Most managers wait until they are sure, and by then the person has often been struggling for months. CIPD found just 60% of managers say they have the training to manage their people well ([CIPD, Good Work Index 2025](#)).

You are not there to diagnose or to fix. Your job is four things: **Notice, Ask, Listen, Offer**. This guide is a prompt for managers, not clinical advice.

Notice

Look for change from their normal, not one bad day. Several of these over a few weeks is your cue to have the conversation.

- ☐ Quieter or more withdrawn than usual
- ☐ The quality or energy of their work has dropped and you can't easily explain why
- ☐ Someone who used to take initiative has stopped putting their hand up
- ☐ Longer hours, less getting done
- ☐ More irritable, cynical or short with colleagues
- ☐ Changes in appearance, attendance or punctuality
- ☐ They have mentioned being tired, stressed or overwhelmed more than once
- ☐ They seem to have lost the spark that made them good at the job

Ask

You are opening a door, not delivering feedback. Set it up before you start:

- Choose a private, low-pressure setting, not their desk and not back-to-back with another meeting
- Go in without an agenda
- Check your own state first. If you are rushed or stressed, it will feel transactional
- Say what stays between you, and be honest that if you are worried about their safety you may need to involve others

Then start simply:

- "I've noticed you seem a bit different lately. I wanted to check in, with no agenda."
- "How are you actually doing? Not the work answer, the real one."
- "How have you been sleeping lately, and has that changed?"
- "What is taking more out of you than it should right now?"

Listen

The most useful thing you can do is make them feel heard.

- Listen more than you talk, and let silence sit
- Reflect back what you hear: "It sounds like you've been carrying a lot."
- Don't jump to solutions or start with "have you tried"
- Don't label it. Avoid telling them they are burnt out. Let them describe it

Offer

Let them lead, and keep it small.

- Ask: "What would actually help you right now?"
- Agree one small, concrete thing, not a plan. For example moving a deadline, clearing a meeting, or protecting an hour
- Follow up within a week, privately, so it is clear this was not a one-off

When it is more than you can handle

If someone tells you they are not coping, or you are worried about their safety, don't handle it alone. Bring in HR and encourage them to speak to their GP or your employee assistance programme. If someone is in immediate danger, call emergency services (112 in Ireland, 999 in the UK).

NEXT STEP

To talk it through, get in touch

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