



# Having a **CONVERSATION** About Mental Health

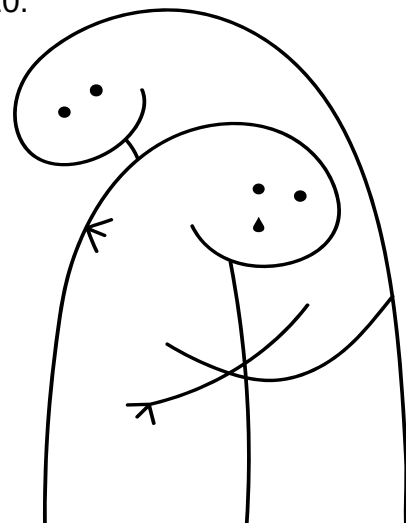
Thursday 8th September marks RU OK? Day, a national day built around starting a meaningful conversation with a friend, family member or colleague about their mental health, and spotting the signs in someone you know that may be struggling with life.

The entire conversation starts with a simple question: "Are you okay?"

## **Why is asking 'are you ok?' so important?**

Poor mental health in Australia is perhaps more prominent now than it has ever been — especially following the last few years and the current world we live in.

According to the Department of Health and Aged Care, at least 1 in 2 Australians will face mental health issues at some point in their lives. This is impacting a growing suicide rate which, over the last decade, has increased for males from 16.2 deaths per 100,000 population in 2011 to 18.6 in 2020. Statistics for females are also up, from 5.1 deaths per 100,000 population in 2011 to 5.8 in 2020.



However, while suicide prevention is of upmost importance, poor mental health has other nefarious impacts on people and organisations. For the individual, it affects their quality of life and can lead them down a path of poor physical health, or even drug or alcohol abuse, which can have drastic implications down the line for themselves and the people around them. For organisations, poor mental health contributes towards poor working environments and financial losses.

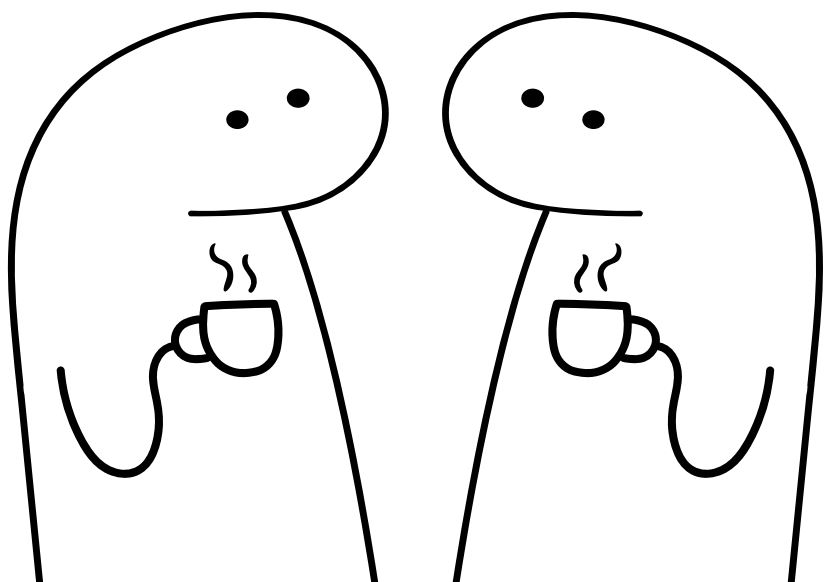
According to the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, mental illness contributes to losses of around \$11 billion for Australian businesses each year, through sick days, reduced productivity and work performance, and compensation claims. Added to this is the emotional devastation it can have on the individual experiencing it and their families and workplaces.

While RU OK? Day is largely about individuals reaching out to others and checking in on their mental health, it's also a day for organisations and leaders to examine their workplace culture. Are they cultivating a psychologically safe place where employees feel safe talking about mental health issues? Is mental health support easily accessible? And what can be improved?

## **You don't have to be an expert to ask: Are you okay?**

While a nice gesture, not everyone will feel comfortable asking all the people they know if they're okay mentally — and that's okay because it's not necessary! Usually, this question and conversation is reserved for someone who doesn't appear themselves.

If you know them well, the signs may be obvious. Your friend or family member, for example, might appear more irritable than usual, be more reclusive or their eating habits may have changed. Spotting changes in a colleague can sometimes be harder, but there are telltale signs. They might start missing project deadlines, acting more quietly or aggressively, turning up late, complain they're not getting enough sleep, or change their appearance such as dressing inappropriately or appearing more unkempt than usual.



Whatever the case, sometimes the perceived stigma that surrounds asking someone if they're okay might hold you back. However, remember that the benefits of enquiring about mental health far outweighs the potential negatives. By asking this question you are demonstrating to that person they can have support when they need it. So, even if a person responds that they are fine, they are likely to appreciate that you care and may even open up to you later.

You don't need to be an expert to have an RU OK? conversation. However, the conversation is more likely to be successful if you follow these simple suggestions:

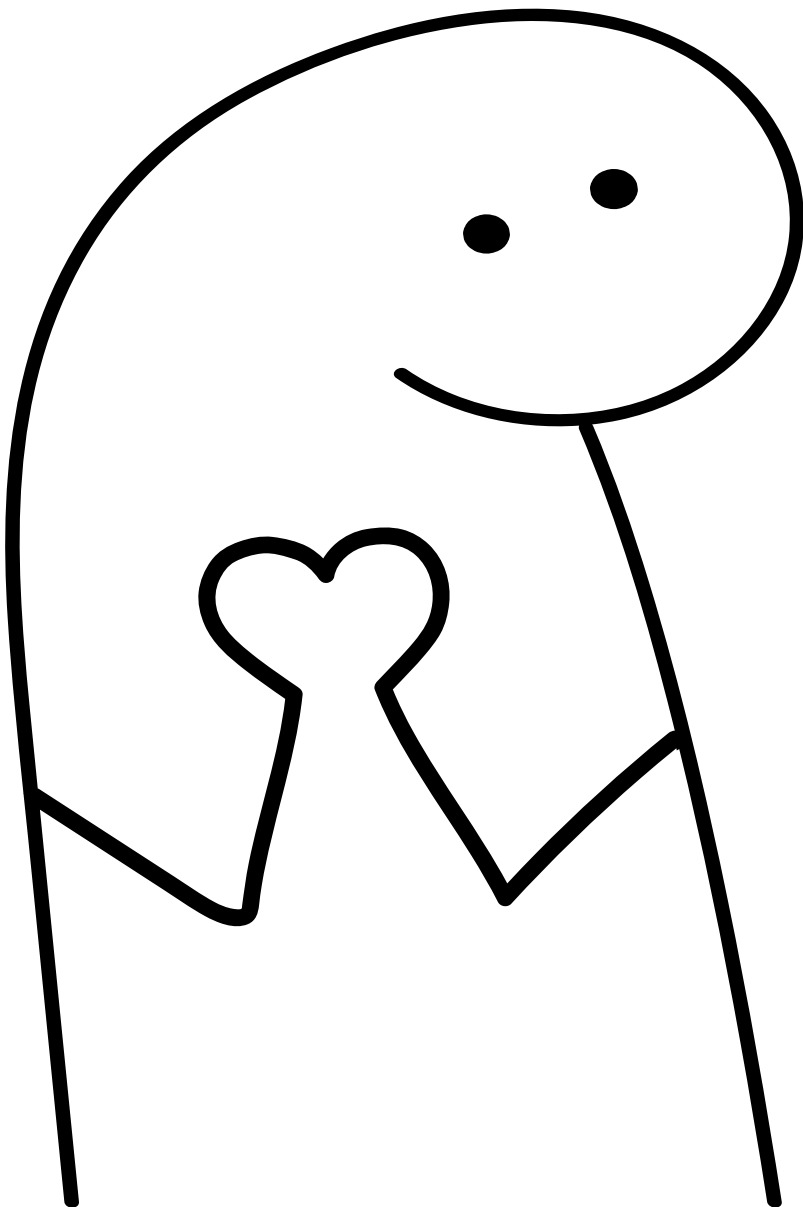
- **Pick an appropriate time when you can start the conversation.**
- **Be sure that you have picked a private moment to have a conversation.**
- **Be relaxed and friendly and show that you feel genuine concern for their health.**
- **Ask questions like "How are you going?" or "Is everything OK?" Initially avoid questioning their recent changes in behaviour as this might lead them to be defensive.**
- **Actively listen to what they say and avoid being judgmental.**
- **Encourage them to take action so they can begin their journey towards feeling better.**

Listening and giving someone your time might be just what they need to help them through. However, if the person admits they have a mental health issue, suggest they contact their GP or, if your organisation is with Converge, contact our friendly team on 1300 687 327 to talk to a mental health professional.



## **Creating a mentally safe environment at work - for managers**

As managers, it's important to check in with your team to ensure they are doing okay mentally. However, the employee is more likely to acknowledge a mental health problem if you have cultivated an environment where they feel safe in disclosing their personal feelings.



While this may not happen overnight, it's important to:

- **Check-in on your team members or direct reports from time to time with simple questions like 'Are you okay?' or 'How are you travelling?'.**
- **Respectfully shut down gossip about work colleagues who are known to have, or even suspected of having a mental health problem in their lives that might be impacting their ability to work. Salacious speculation and assumptions are rarely accurate or helpful and should be assertively discouraged.**
- **Be mindful of what you say in shared workspaces versus in the privacy of a meeting room behind closed doors, as more vulnerable people are acutely sensitive to embarrassment.**
- **Share your own struggles or vulnerabilities in past times and how you transitioned through those tough times. Obviously, this requires mutual trust and cannot be forced, but this demonstrates your humility, empathy and communicates that mental health is not about hierarchy.**

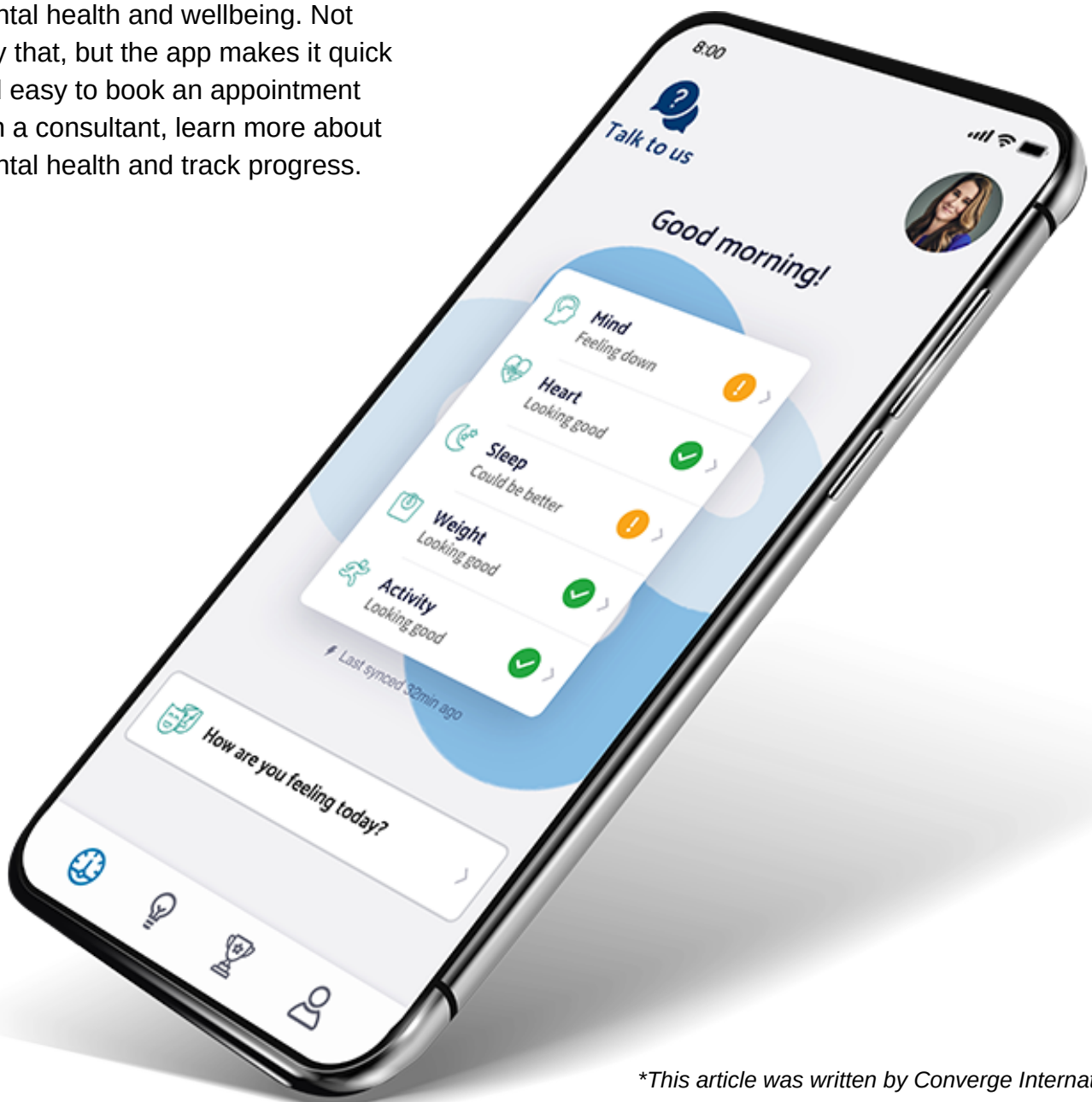
## Now is a great time to promote awareness of the Converge App

If your organisation has signed up to use the new (free) Converge App as part of its EAP offering, R U OK? Day is the perfect opportunity to raise awareness of its benefits to all employees.

The app uses award-winning technology to engage every user and gives them the tools, autonomy, self-awareness and motivation to take control of their mental health and wellbeing. Not only that, but the app makes it quick and easy to book an appointment with a consultant, learn more about mental health and track progress.

It's not just the end-user that benefits. Organisations also receive aggregate reporting in the form of easy-to-digest data to help them understand the wellbeing trends of their people. The whole process is completely confidential, with no identifying data reported.

[Click here](#) to learn more about our new and improved Converge App.



*\*This article was written by Converge International*

# We all have a role to play in preventing suicide.



10 September 2022



Suicide Prevention Australia acknowledges the suffering suicide brings when it touches our lives. We are brought together by experience and are unified by hope.

If you or someone you know is struggling, please reach out for help

**Lifeline:** 13 11 14    **Beyond Blue:** 1300 224 636    **Suicide Call Back Service:** 1300 659 467

[suicidepreventionaust.org/find-help](https://suicidepreventionaust.org/find-help)

