

Checking “Vital Signs”

Recognizing and Responding to a Peer’s Need for Support

As a health care professional, you know how important it is to maintain a patient’s vital signs. When providing routine patient care or responding to an emergency, checking vitals, looking for potential signs of decline and proactively mitigating health risks can be lifesaving.

You can also use this approach to check mental health “vital signs” among peers, whether during the workday or between shifts. Recognizing changes in a colleague’s well-being can be an important way to identify warning signs and take action *before* a crisis develops.

Look and Listen

You are already in the habit of regularly assessing your patients – pausing to examine, listen and take note of any potential problems. Follow the same steps to check on peers and help identify when support may be needed.



- Withdrawing or self-isolating
- Changes in mood; increased sadness
- Impulsive, reckless behavior
- Difficulty concentrating or performing tasks



- Expressing regular trouble with sleep or recurring nightmares
- Talking about relationship or family problems
- Making comments about suicide or self-harm

Speak Up

Taking vital signs isn’t just about identifying potential problems – it’s also about taking action to ensure safety and improve outcomes. When you notice an irregular vital sign, you bring it to the attention of your colleague or treatment team and work together to evaluate and care for the patient.

Use this approach if you’re concerned about the safety and well-being of a peer. Don’t wait for them to ask for help. Even if it feels somewhat uncomfortable, start a conversation. Simply asking how they’re doing lets them know you care – and they don’t have to struggle alone.

- If your peer doesn’t want to talk about it, it’s best not to try to force a conversation. Just let them know that you care and you’re willing to listen.
- If your peer wants to talk, give them your full attention, show compassion, and avoid judging their behavior or responses. Don’t try to “solve” the problem for them, but offer positive suggestions and share resources. Encourage them to seek additional support.
- If you think a peer may be considering suicide, it’s important to ask the question directly. This can seem like a hard thing to do, but it consists of one simple question: “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” If they say “yes,” do not leave them alone. Stay with them to make sure they’re safe, and call or text a crisis line for immediate support.

When you ask about suicide directly, it gives the person an opportunity to answer honestly and ask for help if they need it.



988 Suicide and Crisis Line:
Call or text “9-8-8”

Crisis Text Line:
Text “SCRUBS” to 741741

For more information about supporting a peer, including helpful conversation starters and resources, scan the QR code or go to nami.org/FrontlineHealthCare.

