

# HOW TO GIVE THE GIFT OF CONVERSATION

*How are you?*

A practical guide to when  
and how to ask R U OK?

**RUOK?**<sup>TM</sup>

A conversation could change a life.



# How conversations can make a difference

Seniors living in Australia represent a wealth of talent and experience. We've been there and done that and along the way have made an invaluable contribution to our nation. That contribution continues into retirement with volunteer work, informal community care roles and through passing on the benefit of our wisdom and life skills. Yet, ageing is not without challenges – health, relocation, loss, isolation or difficulties completing tasks that were once simple – any of these can lead to us or our older friends, family members or neighbours becoming disconnected from community and support networks.

A simple chat can mean everything to a friend or loved one who might be struggling. Even if they seem fine, it doesn't mean they are. Those in need of support might not always ask for it. That's why you need to trust your instincts and, if you're worried about someone in your world, reach out and ask, 'are you OK?'

Comment on the changes you've noticed and help them access support to stop small problems becoming bigger issues.

We all sometimes struggle with life's ups and downs but by making time to support someone who is doing it tough you could change, or even save, their life.

**In this practical guide you'll find tips to help you give the gift of conversation because your natter matters.**

“Talking wasn't something we did when I was growing up. But we're meant to share our lives and we're meant to talk. Looking out for each other is important.”



# What's in the guide?

- 1 The signs it might be time to start a conversation 5
- 2 How to have a conversation 8
- 3 What if they don't want to talk to me? 10
- 4 Useful contacts for someone who's not OK 14



## The signs it might be time to start an R U OK? conversation

Sometimes the reason someone is struggling is obvious. They might be grieving the loss of a loved one, facing a major health challenge or navigating a change in their life circumstances.

However, it can often be something hidden. They might be putting on a brave face but feeling isolated. They might be dealing with financial or family related stress that you don't know about.

It won't always be obvious when someone's not doing so well but there are changes you can look out for that might signal they need some extra support.

### Have you noticed a change in what they're saying?

Are they:

- Confused or irrational
- Moody
- Concerned about the future
- Concerned they're a burden
- Lonely or lacking self-esteem
- Concerned they're trapped or in pain
- Frustrated about their situation



## Have you noticed a change in what they're doing?

Are they:

- Experiencing mood swings
- Dismissive or defensive
- Self-medicating
- Becoming withdrawn or isolating themselves
- Behaving recklessly
- Losing interest in what they used to love
- Less interested in their appearance and personal hygiene
- Changing their sleep patterns



## Is there something going on in their life?

Have they experienced:

- The loss of someone or something they love
- Major health issues
- Financial difficulty
- A loss or change in their levels of independence
- Relocated to a new community or neighbourhood

**If you notice a change or just have a feeling that something is not quite right, it's time to start a conversation.**

## It's none of my business

We all value our privacy and respect the privacy of others. You might be telling yourself 'it's none of my business' or 'they won't want to talk to me about it anyway'. It's a normal reaction for you to be unsure or a little embarrassed but it's better to step in than to ignore that feeling you have that something is not quite right. If someone is feeling isolated or alone having someone show they care can make all the difference.

Remember though, even when you do make the first move, there's no guarantee they'll be ready to talk – but they'll know someone cares and next time you ask they might be ready.



# How to have a conversation with someone you're worried about



## Ask R U OK?

### How to start the conversation

You want your conversation to feel as comfortable and normal as possible. Pick a place (in person, on the phone or online) that feels right for you and your relationship with this person. Choose somewhere private, where you'll both feel comfortable. It can help to avoid crowded places or times when you might be interrupted.

When starting the conversation, be relaxed and friendly in your approach. Let them know you've noticed a change. Make an observation:

- "I haven't seen you around as much lately. Is everything going OK?"
- "You've seemed a bit out of sorts recently. How's everything going?"
- "I know you've had a lot on your plate. How are you managing?"

If they can't talk when you first approach them, arrange a time that's more convenient for them to have a chat.

### Pick up the phone

It's not always possible to have a conversation face-to-face or via video call. If distance or technology is an issue give them a call. There's something about a phone call that feels more personal and private and that can often help people open up and have a meaningful conversation.



**"A lot of people think that feeling more irritable or down is a normal part of ageing and we just try to get on with things which can be a bit of a barrier to seeking help. That's why we need to talk and encourage them to seek help if they need it."**



# What if they don't want to talk to me?

It can be hard to talk about thoughts and feelings. For some people their unwillingness to talk might be related to past experiences or concern about what will happen if they share that they're struggling.

They might be worried about becoming a burden, that friends, family and loved ones will treat them differently or feel that what they're experiencing is shameful or makes them appear weak. They might also be concerned about how mental ill health was treated in the past and not be aware of the advances that have been made. They might not even recognise that what they are feeling is to do with their mental health.

## If someone is uncomfortable opening up it's important to:

- Respect their decision not to talk; don't force them into it or criticise them.
- Focus on some things they might be comfortable talking about like, "I know you've had trouble sleeping and concentrating lately. Can we talk about that?"
- Emphasise that you're asking because you care and are genuinely concerned about them.
- Suggest they talk to someone they trust, another family member or friend. You could say, "You can always call me if you ever want to chat. But is there someone else you'd rather talk to?"
- Remind them that you're always here if they want to chat.

The act of reaching out to them might encourage them to reflect on how they're doing and prompt them to talk... "I thought I was doing such a good job keeping my troubles to myself but others are noticing. Maybe I should talk to someone."



## Listen with an open mind

- Be prepared to listen – don't try and solve their problems.
- Have an open mind.
- Don't rush or interrupt. Let them speak in their own time.
- Let them know you're asking because you're concerned:
  - "I'm worried about you"
  - "Sometimes talking about it can really help"
  - "Why don't you start from the beginning, I'll make us a cuppa"
- Ask questions to learn more about how they feel, when they feel this way and what might help to improve the way they feel:
  - "What's been happening?"
  - "Have you been feeling this way for a while?"
  - "So, what was that like?"
- Check with the person that you have properly understood what they've said.



**"I'm so glad I have people who have been there and understand what I'm saying. They make me feel safe to say all the bad or stupid stuff that I can't say to anyone else as I know they won't judge me."**





## Encourage action

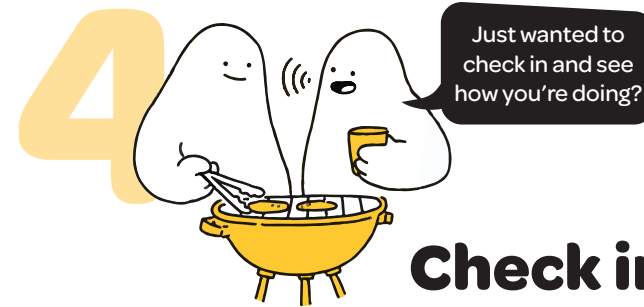
You won't always have the answers or be able to provide advice to the person. In fact, sometimes it's better not to give advice. Some problems are too big for a friend and family member to solve and professional help might be needed.

Try and encourage them to think of at least one step they could take to help them lighten the load.

Ask them:

- "Where do you think we can go from here?"
- "What do you need from me? How can I help?"
- "What would be a good first step we can take?"
- "Have you thought about talking to your doctor?"

**"Thank goodness we have family that live nearby – but it's hard, you can't always talk to your children in the same way you would a friend."**



## Check in

Try and get their agreement to check in again with them soon: "Do you mind if I drop by again soon to see how you're travelling?"

It's also helpful to follow up in a few days to see how they're doing. This reinforces that you genuinely care and want to help.

Ask if they've found a better way to manage the situation. You could ask:

- "How have things been going since we last chatted?"
- "Did you see the doctor?"
- "Would it be useful if we tried to find some other options to help you get through this?"

Understand that sometimes it takes time to admit you need help and access support. Stick with them and know that being there for them means a lot.

### How to stay connected and show support

Maintain the relationship that you have with them. They might be looking forward to the time they spend with you. You could:

- Pop round regularly for a cuppa.
- Ask them about activities they like to do and help make plans to do them or offer to do them together.
- Arrange group catch-ups with other people and help them connect.





“We can show them there is hope and help out there. If you know someone who needs help, let them know you’re there for them.”



## Useful contacts for someone who’s not OK

If you need professional support, please contact your doctor, local health centre or one of the services listed below. Family and friends can also call upon these services for advice and assistance on how to support someone who is struggling with life.

### **Beyond Blue (24/7)**

1300 224 636  
beyondblue.org.au

### **Lifeline (24/7)**

13 11 14  
lifeline.org.au

### **Suicide Call Back Service (24/7)**

1300 659 467  
suicidecallbackservice.org.au

### **SANE Australia:**

1800 18 SANE (7263)  
sane.org

### **Mensline (24/7)**

1300 78 99 78  
mensline.org.au

### **QLife**

1800 184 527  
qlife.org.au

**More contacts:** [ruok.org.au/findhelp](http://ruok.org.au/findhelp)

If you are concerned for your safety or the safety of others, seek immediate assistance by calling **Triple Zero (000)**.

There is a range of organisations that work to connect older Australians with their community and increase their sense of inclusion and belonging. Some of these are listed below:

- **National Seniors Australia** is Australia’s largest not-for-profit organisation for adults aged 50 years and older, with more than 200,000 members and a network of branches across the country.  
[nationalseniors.com.au](http://nationalseniors.com.au)
- **COTA** is active in all states and territories and advocates on behalf of older Australians.  
[cota.org.au](http://cota.org.au)
- Volunteer run organisations that promote education and social activities for older Australians and provide services include:  
**University of the Third Age (U3A), Probus, Volunteering Australia, Country Women’s Association, Rotary Australia, Meals on Wheels**
- The **Red Cross** operate social connection programs for vulnerable older people as well as programs linked to government funded services.  
[redcross.org.au/get-help/community-services/services-for-older-people](http://redcross.org.au/get-help/community-services/services-for-older-people)
- **The Australian Men’s Shed Association** encourages social connection for men through a national network of local sheds.  
[mensshed.org](http://mensshed.org)
- **Stitch.net** is an online platform for over 50s that connects members across interests, hobbies and activities to encourage community and companionship.  
[www.stitch.net](http://www.stitch.net)
- **See me. Know me** Meaningful Ageing Australia’s initiative to help older people feel more valued, connected to themselves and others; and if they need aged care, to find services that take a holistic view of each person.  
[seemeknowme.org.au](http://seemeknowme.org.au)



**RUOK?**<sup>TM</sup>

A conversation could change a life.

**[ruok.org.au](http://ruok.org.au)**