


Peer Support Tool: Helping your colleagues using the OSCAR Communication Framework



Many people feel uncomfortable asking others about their stress reactions. We know how to have casual conversations with peers, but when it comes to discussing personal issues, troubling behaviors, or emotions, we often don't know where or how to start. Another common barrier to accurate assessment is the almost automatic denial of experiencing any stressors, distress, or changes in functioning.

One tool that can be effective in overcoming these obstacles is “OSCAR” communication—a mnemonic (memory device) for the five steps of:

Observe: Actively observe behaviors; look for patterns or changes that are consistent with the stress injury warning signs.

Changes in attitude or demeanor
Withdrawal by someone who is usually right in the middle of the action
Expressing anger or bitterness
Lashing out at others
Missing work or class
Tearfulness

State Observations: Using words that reflect the behaviors you have seen; not attitudes, motivations, or thoughts; state what you have seen.

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been having to call out a lot lately. Is everything ok?”
“You are always my go-to colleague for a dose of positivity. But I’ve noticed that you have been unusually critical and negative lately. Has something changed?”
“We’ve missed seeing you in study group this month. Is everything ok?”

Clarify Role: In our professions, we are required to adhere to a code of conduct and have role bound expectations. Peers, supervisors, trainers, spouses, parents, friends are bound by the roles we share with others. There are times that we have more than one role with coworkers. You, and they, need to understand where you are coming from.

“As your supervisor, I have noticed...”
“As your colleague and friend, I have noticed...”
“As your classmate and study partner, I have observed...”

Ask Why: The “A” in OSCAR does *not* stand for “assume.” Seek clarification. Be curious. Try to understand the other person's perception of the behaviors you’ve observed. An excellent way to ask why is to start with, *“Help me understand...”*

Respond: Telling someone what they should do or giving unrequested advice rarely works out. Provide Guided Options. *“Do you want to talk with Cindy at EAP or our supervisor, Jack?”* Clarify concern if indicated; discuss desired behaviors and state options in behavioral terms. The idea is that we want to assist the person to expand their support resources and their options. Stress injuries heal best when additional resources are available.