

World Mental Health Day 2025: First aid guide for stress, anxiety for all

On World Mental Health Day 2025, experts share how to spot early signs of stress, anxiety, or depression and offer timely first aid support

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World Mental Health Day highlights the importance of early support, first aid, and awareness for stress, anxiety, and depression. (Photo: AdobeStock)

Have you ever noticed a colleague staring blankly at their screen for a long time, or a friend suddenly disappearing from group chats? We often brush off these signs as “stress” or “just a phase.” But what if these are early warning signals of a mental health crisis? Would you know what to say, or what not to say?

On [World Mental Health Day 2025](#), we spoke to doctors to put together a mental health first aid kit with simple steps to handle stress, anxiety, and support yourself and others.

When does normal stress tip into a real mental health risk?

Stress is part of every workday. But Dr Paramjeet Singh, Consultant Psychiatrist at PSRI Hospital, Delhi, says you need to watch out when stress stops being temporary and starts interfering with your life.

Signs include:

- Feeling persistently low for more than two weeks
- Not cheering up, even with things you usually enjoy
- Thinking about self-harm or feeling hopeless
- Struggling to complete daily tasks consistently
- Sleep, appetite, or sex drive is taking a big hit
- Irritability is so intense that it threatens your relationships

If you see these patterns, it’s no longer “normal” stress and it is time to take professional help seriously.

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What are the earliest signs that someone might be in crisis?

According to Dr Malini Saba, psychologist, human and social rights activist and founder of the Saba Family Foundation, the earliest signs are subtle but visible if you are paying attention.

- **Behavioural:** withdrawing from conversations, isolating at work, losing interest in hobbies
- **Mood:** irritability, persistent sadness, restlessness
- **Sleep:** too much, too little, or restless sleep
- **Thinking:** scattered, slow, or gloomy thought patterns

Often, the body speaks before the mind does. Headaches, stomach aches, fatigue, or a racing heartbeat with no medical explanation can actually be masks for anxiety, depression, or stress.

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How do warning signs differ across conditions?

Every mental health challenge has a slightly different fingerprint, said the experts.

- **Anxiety:** restlessness, constant worry, avoidance
- **Depression:** withdrawal, hopelessness, loss of joy
- **Bipolar disorder:** swinging between impulsive highs and crushing lows
- **Psychosis:** paranoia, hallucinations, losing touch with reality
- **Substance use:** secrecy, erratic moods, neglect of responsibilities
- **PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder):** intense reactions to triggers, hyper-alertness, emotional shutdown

Recognise digital signals: Experts

According to Dr Singh and Dr Saba, digital signals are becoming increasingly important. If someone suddenly vanishes from chats, posts cryptic or hopeless messages, or even searches for self-harm content online, do not ignore it. But not every sad post equals a crisis. Context matters, but if it is a consistent pattern combined with offline changes, then it is cause for worry.

What should you say if you are concerned?

This is where most of us freeze. We want to help but fear saying the wrong thing. Both experts agree: tone, intent, and empathy matter more than perfection.

Try saying:

- “I’ve noticed you seem different lately, and I care about you.”
- “Would you like to share how you’re feeling?”
- “What can I do to support you?”
- “Would you be open to talking to a professional?”

What not to say:

- “Calm down.”
- “Others have it worse.”
- “Just be positive.”

Instead, validate their feelings: “That sounds really heavy. I can see why you’re struggling.”

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How can you check if someone is at immediate risk?

You don’t need to be a psychiatrist to ask the right questions. Dr Singh suggests plain, direct, but empathetic questions like:

- “Have you thought about hurting yourself recently?”
- “Do you feel safe with your thoughts right now?”
- “Have you been more irritable or aggressive lately?”
- “Should I be worried about you?”

If they mention a specific plan, method, or timeline for self-harm, that is an emergency. Stay with them and seek professional help immediately.

How do you encourage help-seeking without being pushy?

No one likes being forced. Instead of saying, “You need therapy,” try:

- “Would you like me to help you find someone to talk to?”
- “There are a few options, we can see which feels right for you.”

The goal is to preserve autonomy while gently nudging toward professional help.

‘Tough love’ is rarely helpful: Experts

Dr Saba explains that tough love often shames or pressures the person, making things worse. A safer alternative:

“I care about you too much to ignore this. Let’s find support together.”

Firmness and empathy can go hand in hand, so set boundaries, but do not withdraw support.

What about specific situations like with teens, workplaces, postpartum, older adults?

- **Teens:** Parents should listen first; teachers should step in only if safety is at risk.
- **Workplace:** HR or managers can privately check in, offer flexibility, and share resources, but never in a public setting.
- **Postpartum mothers:** Detachment from the baby, anger, or suicidal thoughts are urgent red flags and one should seek same-day help.
- **Older adults:** Distinguish between grief, dementia, and depression. Always consult doctors for medication interactions.
- **Substance withdrawal:** If the person is shaking, suffering seizures, or confusion, it is a medical emergency.
- **LGBTQ+ individuals:** Respect pronouns, use inclusive language, and refer to safe, affirming networks.

The doctors reassured that you don’t need to be a doctor to make a difference. You just need to be present, notice changes, and ask the right questions with empathy. One conversation, one moment of support, can literally save a life.

About World Mental Health Day

[World Mental Health Day](#), observed every year on October 10 since 1992, was initiated by the World Federation for Mental Health with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) to raise awareness and reduce stigma around mental health. The theme for 2025, “Mental health in emergencies,” highlights the urgent need for mental health support during crises such as conflicts, pandemics, and climate disasters.