



Supporting friends and coworkers in times of personal crisis

Aetna Resources For LivingSM

It can be hard to know what to do or say to help others who are experiencing a personal crisis. It's especially difficult when they're your coworkers and their crisis is due to organizational changes within your workplace.

Your coworkers are people you encounter every day. Some may be close friends while others are casual acquaintances. In either case, it's natural for you to feel uncertain when you know they've received news that their job will be changing. Here are some thoughts and suggestions that may help you find comfortable ways to be supportive.

It's a big help to just "be there"

People who've experienced job changes are grieving. They may act angry, sad, shocked, ashamed — they may even break down and cry. Grief includes all of these emotions and more. One of the most important things you can do for people who are struggling is to simply be present and listen.

True listening allows the other person to talk without the listener:

- Making judgments, such as: "You shouldn't feel that way."
- Minimizing feelings, such as: "You're getting too upset over this."
- Making predictions that have no real basis, such as: "You'll get another job in no time."

Most people truly want to help but often don't know what to say. They may also be uncomfortable with expressions of pain, sadness or anger. So while these types of responses may be well-meaning, they may actually block communication with the person trying to express painful feelings. They're not part of effective listening.

How can you listen effectively?

Effective listening lets people know they are heard — and understood. Here are several strategies to enable you as a listener to do just that.

- **Let the other person vent.** You don't need to say much at all. But if there's a pause, you can say something like, "I'm so sorry you're hurting," or "I'm here for you." You may want to assure privacy as in, "You can talk to me and it won't go any further." If you make this important promise, be sure to keep it! Gossip runs rampant during stressful times, and it will help your coworkers to know that you won't make their personal business part of the office rumor mill. Remember: As a listener you don't have to provide answers — just a caring presence!
- **Accept your coworker's feelings.** Try to avoid saying "I know just how you feel" because no one truly knows how another feels. It's more helpful to say or do things that convey your understanding of the feelings expressed. When friends are upset, you can nod your head, pat them on the back or literally allow them to cry on your shoulder. Again, you don't need to say much.
- **Offer help you can provide and that is acceptable.** Sometimes people in crisis push others away and decline any type of help. If that's the case, you can try — gently — to offer help, but you must also respect the other person's space. At some point, he or she may come to feel more open to assistance. Then, if your coworker needs help that you can — and want to — provide, go ahead and offer it. Support might be a simple gesture such as arranging to meet your coworker for lunch or coffee break each day to provide some company. Take your lead from your coworker's wishes.

And what about your own feelings?

People and businesses across the country are going through tough economic times and feelings of insecurity are widespread. When there are changes, it's natural to feel shaken — even if you're not directly impacted. Some common reactions include:

- **Survivor guilt.** You may feel very upset for your coworkers — and you may even feel "survivor guilt" because you weren't affected. Survivor guilt — as with other forms of guilt — is typically not constructive. Try to remember it's not your fault your coworkers were impacted, and if your coworkers are resentful, try to let it go. Their feelings may change with time and you may be able to be of help in the future.
- **Fear.** You may be scared — and that's completely understandable. During times of organizational change, everyone feels vulnerable. You may even feel that you want to avoid coworkers. If that's the case, take care of yourself in the way that is best for you. You must feel emotionally safe yourself before you can be supportive of another's pain.
- **Sense of loss.** You're likely to feel grief too. It's hard to witness others' hardships, say goodbye to friends and stay behind in a changed environment. Don't be surprised if you experience your own anger, sadness, shock and other grief reactions.

Overall, remember that organizational change is tough on everyone. Try to be patient and considerate not only to others, but to yourself as well.

Contact us

If you'd like help in dealing with life's pressure, we're here for you. It's a confidential service that helps you and your family work through everyday stress.

It's hard to know how to comfort friends who are going through a difficult time.

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