

How to Listen to a Colleague Who is Suffering

Whenever people face mental health issues resulting from loss of a loved one, trauma, or any other reason, they need to talk about it in order to heal. To talk, they need willing listeners.

Unfortunately, many of us try to avoid listening to people in pain. We may feel like we have enough troubles of our own or be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing.

What Typically Happens

Sometimes we excuse ourselves by assuming that listening to people who are hurting is strictly a matter for professionals, such as psychotherapists or members of the clergy. It is true that professionals can help in special ways and provide the suffering individual with insights that most of us are not able to offer. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring interest of supervisors, co-workers, friends and others from the person's normal daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person's painful feelings. But it is important not to let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to help someone who is suffering.

What to Do

Though each situation is unique, the most important thing to do is simply be there and listen and show you care.

- Keep your comments brief and simple so you do not get the person off track.
- Ask questions which show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking. For example, "What happened next?" or "What was that like?"
- If possible, give verbal and non-verbal messages of caring and support. Facial expressions and body posture go a long way toward showing your interest. Do not hesitate to interject your own feelings as appropriate.
- Let people know that it is OK to cry. Some people are embarrassed if they cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that tears are normal and appropriate. It is also OK if you get a bit teary yourself.

What Not to Do

Do not be distressed by differences in the way people respond. One person may react very calmly, while another expresses strong feelings. One person may have an immediate emotional response while another may be "numb" at first and respond emotionally later.

Emotions are rarely simple. People who are suffering loss often feel anger along with grief. Unless you see signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response at the moment. If a person is usually rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.

It is natural to worry about saying the wrong thing. People will understand if you say something awkward in a difficult situation. Use this to guide you:

- Do not offer unsolicited advice. People usually will ask for advice later if they need it; initially it just gets in the way of talking things out.



- Do not turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If you have had a similar experience, you may want to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. But do not say, “I know exactly how you feel,” because everybody is different.
- Do not say anything which tries to minimize the person’s pain such as, “You shouldn’t take it so hard” or “It could be a lot worse.”
- Do not say anything which asks the person to disguise or reject his or her feelings such as, “You have to pull yourself together.”

The 5 A’s Model of Intervention

The 5 A’s model was developed by the National Cancer Institute to help people quit smoking, but it is often used as a model for intervention in the hopes of bringing about behavior change. The 5 A’s stand for:

Ask

Are you ready to do something to change? Can I help?

Assess

How bad is the problem and how can we help?

Advise

Make clear, specific, personalized recommendations

Assist

Help where and when you can

Arrange

Refer to them to supports at work, such as your EAP, or in the community

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Afterward

Once you have finished talking, it may be appropriate to offer simple forms of help such as:

- Checking about basic things like eating and sleeping
- Preparing and dropping off a meal may help the person find an appetite
- Offering to take on a task such as shopping can help

Ask what else you can do to be of assistance.

After you have talked to someone who is hurting, you may feel as if you have absorbed some of that person’s pain. Take care of yourself by talking to a friend, taking a walk or doing whatever helps restore your own spirits.

