

HELPING A PERSON COPE WITH CHANGE, CRISIS OR LOSS

It's natural to feel inadequate when someone - perhaps a friend or relative tells you their troubles, but you can often be of real assistance. Neighbors, friends and relatives who show warmth and common sense can be a wonderful help in many instances.

When trying to help, consider the following:

- **Show by words and actions that you care**
- **Help the person accept help**
- **Help with everyday tasks**
- **Talking it out**
- **Be a good listener**
- **Don't give false hope**
- **Don't encourage the blaming on others**
- **Point out illogical thinking**
- **Encourage the presentation of facts and constructive possibilities**
- **Focus on the future**
- **Encourage sensible health habits**
- **Respect privacy**
- **Knowing your limitations**

*Adapted from a Minnesota Extension
Service bulletin, "Helping Persons Cope
With Change, Crisis, Loss"*

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It's natural to feel inadequate when someone - perhaps a friend or relative tells you their troubles, but you can often be of real assistance. Neighbors, friends and relatives who show warmth and common sense can be a wonderful help in many instances.

Show by words and actions that you care

Our society tends to put a "taboo" on tenderness, so simple, open affection might embarrass some people. Remember, however, that a friendly arm around troubled shoulders, a kind deed and the expression of sincere feelings of affection, admiration or concern for a troubled person can mean a lot. Let the person suffering a crisis experience your warmth and concern.

Help the person accept help

One way people avoid facing a crisis is to deny they need assistance. Studies show that people who have difficulty working through a crisis or loss are inclined to brush off offers of help and persist in the fantasy that everything is all right. The person who acknowledges that he/she is in trouble, actively looks for help and gratefully accepts it, is on the way to a healthy solution of the crisis.

Help with everyday tasks

The idea that a person in trouble needs help with small, everyday tasks is right and sound. For example, it is considerate to cook dinner for a friend with a sick child or to quietly assume extra work when a co-worker is having trouble at home. A crisis disorganizes and disorients a person. Ordinary tasks seem to take more time and energy for a person in crisis because energy must go toward recognition of pain or grief.

If you can give help without suggesting the person you are helping is weak or incompetent, an act of simple kindness can be a real support.

Talking it out

Burdens shared with a friend are often lighter to carry. Discussing your troubles with someone is a way of expressing emotions and can help get rid of some of their effects, too. Putting feelings into words can help a person see the situation more objectively. Sometimes just knowing someone is aware of our hurt feelings, worries or difficult decisions and **cares about us** can mean a great deal.

Be a good listener

If the person is going to talk it out, you must be a good listener. Good listening encourages people to talk about their problems. Here are a few ways of listening to others:

- Stop talking. You can't listen if you're talking.
- Put yourself in the other person's place. Recalling how you might have felt in a similar situation or how others were affected might help. Don't assume, however, that the person's responses will be or should be the same as yours.
- Show you're paying attention. Relax your body, and let your movements be natural. If you usually gesture a lot, feel free to do so now.
- Initiate and maintain eye contact with the person. If you're going to listen to someone, look at him/her. Vary eye contact rather than staring fixedly or with undue intensity.
- Take your cue for response or action from what the person is saying. Don't jump from subject to subject or interrupt. If you can't think of anything to say, go back to something the person said earlier and ask a question about that. There's no need to talk about yourself or offer your opinion.
- To help the person get started, use open-ended questions that can't be answered with "yes" or "no". This will allow the person to go into the subject at length. Some examples of open-ended questions or statements are
 - "Tell me about it."
 - "Would you like to talk about it?"
 - "Let's discuss it."
 - "I'm listening."
 - "This seems really important to you."
- Once you've encouraged the person to talk, your response can make a big difference in keeping the conversation going. Remember to nod your head, interject with short, encouraging statements such as, "Oh?" or "Then what happened?" In response to a statement, try saying:
 - "Tell me more."
 - "How did you feel about that?"
 - "What does that mean to you?"
- Ask questions and listen to the answers. Try and find out how the person feels.
- Don't second-guess what the person is going to say and don't answer without really listening.
- Repeat what you think the person said, asking if you are right, for example: "Is this how you feel?"
- Don't judge the person, it can stop communication.

Don't give false hope

People in trouble desperately want to be reassured and all your feelings may urge you to give that reassurance. But a "there, there, everything will be all right" approach may actually be a disservice - everything may not be all right. By giving false hope you may be relegating the troubled person to the role of a child, making them feel weaker. The kind of reassurance people in difficulty need is not some meaningless comfort that the crisis will take care of itself, but rather a statement of faith that he/she will be strong enough to work it out **even if it is not all right**. Help the person help themselves. Let him/her know you're available to help find a solution. Lend a shoulder as an equal, instead of reassuring him/her like a parent. This provides a more important kind of reassurance - that you have faith in the troubled person's ability to handle the crisis.

Don't encourage the blaming on others

Typical stages of mourning are anger and blaming others for a crisis or loss. Research shows that people who do not cope successfully with a crisis have an overwhelming tendency to dwell on the people or things they imagined were responsible for their trouble. Blaming is a way of avoiding the truth, of looking at the "Might have been" instead of looking at the problem at hand. Don't encourage someone in trouble to speculate on the "villain" in the case with the idea that he/she will feel better if they place the blame on someone else. Laying blame can make it harder or less likely for the person to come out of the crisis strengthened. Blaming can occur whether it's discouraged or not, so listen patiently and try not to fuel the blaming. Encourage the person to see the other side.

Point out illogical thinking

When people are hurting, they may make predictable, illogical statements. For example:

- **All or nothing thinking** - seeing everything in black and white. If their performance falls short of perfect they are total failures.
- **Over generalizing** - seeing a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
- **Mental filter** - picking a single negative detail and dwelling on it exclusively so reality seems bleak and dark.
- **Disqualifying the positive** - rejecting all positive experiences by insisting they "don't count."
- **Jumping to conclusions** - making negative interpretations even though there are no facts to support them. For example, "mind reading" - person concludes someone is reacting negatively to them, but does not bother to check it out. Or, "fortune teller error" - where a person is so convinced things will turn out badly they believe this prediction is an established fact - "It's just a matter of time now" is what they're likely to believe.
- **Magnifying or minimizing the importance of things**. An example of magnifying a problem is viewing a mistake as "your goof up". Minimizing is when a person doesn't recognize a job well done - "I didn't do anything special."
- **Emotional reasoning** - assuming negative emotions reflect the way things really are. For example, "I feel it therefore it must be true."

- **"Should" statements** - the troubled person tries to motivate or punish him/herself or blames someone else. Guilt feelings can result from using "should", "must" or "ought" in self-statements. When directed at someone else, these words can create anger, frustration or resentment.
- **Labeling or mislabeling** - instead of defining the error, the troubled person attaches a negative label, "I'm a ~loser" or "he's a louse."
- **Personalization** - the person may see him/herself as the cause of a negative event when in fact he/she was not primarily responsible - "It's all my fault".

If you recognize illogical thinking, try to soften the words of the person you're trying to help. For example, you might say, "So you think you're a total failure. Tell me something, you've done in your job you're proud of."

You might point out to the troubled person that he/she may not be seeing things as clearly as he/she thinks. For example, you might respond to a negative comment with "You're predicting a gloomy future. But you still have the time and ability to turn things around."

Encourage the presentation of facts and constructive possibilities.

Emotional tension can easily lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation, so it's important the facts be made clear. It's amazing how often people make important decisions without taking the time to look at all the facts and consider all options.

Ask the person to tell you about the change, crisis or loss - when it started, how it occurred or developed, what consequences have resulted, how it has affected him/her, how he/she feels about it.

Here are **some specific steps** you may want to consider when guiding a troubled person:

- Help sort out the pieces of the problem.
- Help separate those parts about which he/she can do something from those he/she can't. There's no use wasting energy on the latter.
- Encourage the person to describe how he/she has tried to solve the problem. There's no point in repeating something that didn't work before.
- Encourage the person to describe or discover other possible solutions and help examine probable consequences.
- Help decide which of the various alternatives he/she will want to try now.

Focus on the future

Encourage the person **to focus on the practical future** rather than dwelling on past wrongs and mistakes. Spouses, children, relatives and neighbors do make mistakes and outside events may cause injustices, inconveniences and discomfort. But bemoaning misfortunes does not help build a better future. Heaping blame on other people or on fate may even lessen that person's willingness to accept responsibility for current actions and may prevent him or her from coping with the problem.

Naturally, you do not want to criticize those you are trying to help. A person in crisis may interpret the criticism as more rejection. Instead, aim at guiding him/her gently by

showing your interest, attention and sympathy when he/she begins to talk about solving the problem. If the person does not voluntarily indicate such intentions, you may - again gently - want to raise some questions such as, "All right, what can you do about this matter?"

Some steps in this process probably include the following:

- Help the person begin solving the problem. An action plan should be realistic and have achievable goals.
- Help the person find the resources to cope - spiritual, interpersonal, and inner.
- Encourage the person to start resolving the problem soon. Help establish a start-up time.
- If the person resists acting on the problem, discuss this and help resolve this feeling. Point out how he/she will start to feel better, less depressed and more hopeful once something (however small) is done about the situation.
- Find out how the action plan worked.
- In subsequent contact, have him/her describe what happened, affirm any successes in implementing the action plan, help rethink any goals (what's the next step?) and repeat those parts which are necessary to help him/her continue coping.

Encourage sensible health habits

The body also has an influence on emotions and mental functions. People are particularly likely to be upset when they're hungry or overtired. You might remind a troubled friend that when problems seem insoluble, a new perspective might be gained simply by having a good night's sleep and well-balanced, wholesome meals. Encourage some form of exercise, too. Walking is a great tension reliever.

Respect privacy

When people are upset they may sometimes tell intimate secrets. Later, they may be sorry they talked so freely. If you are listening to a friend's troubles, try not to lead him/her into revealing information he/she may later regret.

Recognizing the value of every human person, no matter how he/she has acted, is basic to the philosophy of helping others. In some situations, you may have to try especially hard to understand.

Resist any temptation to pass on confidences that have come from intimate conversations. People who confide in you can be comfortable about accepting help only if they feel sure their privacy will be respected. If you violate this confidence, they are almost certain to eventually learn of it and any trust that has developed will be lost. Similarly, sharing with them conversations others have confided in you will suggest you might do the same with their confidences.

Knowing your limitations

Serious problems need professional and experienced help. Individual counseling by a mental health worker, Inter-Faith Pastoral Counseling Services, clinical psychologist, marriage counselor or psychiatrist can often supply the help needed. Group help from

psychotherapy groups or specialty groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous) also meet the needs of many. If you become involved with someone who you think might need more help than you can provide, scout around for possible referrals.

Most everyday human troubles are not serious enough to need outside assistance. A wise, warm, kind-hearted spouse, parent or friend can do much to ease the emotional distress that comes from the worries, disappointment and conflicts of life.

If enough of us are aware of the ways to help others in times of trouble, more and more people can be helped through the inevitable hazards that confront us in life.

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