

# RESPONDING TO A TROUBLED PERSON

Each of us has some basic knowledge of how to help a troubled person. We are reminded of our inherent skills when we reflect on the helpful qualities we identify in those who assist us (eg *she really listened, he took the time and I didn't get preached at*). Yet, so often we feel anxious and inadequate when responding to the pain and suffering we see in others. This newsletter summarizes how to handle some of the challenges presented by troubled persons.

Sometimes the troubled person approaches us directly. More often we may be working beside, living with, or nearby someone who appears upset or troubled, but who as yet has made no request for help. Likewise, we may be in a variety of situations that affect how close, or how motivated, we are to respond. It is worthwhile to reflect on the following questions to assess if help is needed and what reaction is appropriate.

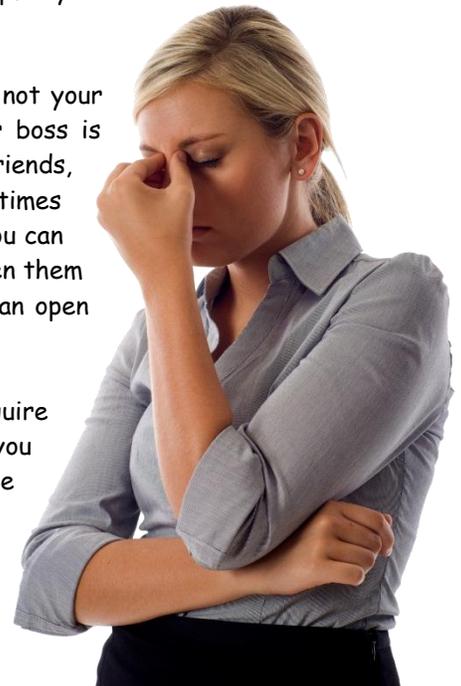
**How do we know if someone is troubled?** Our intuition is probably better than we think. There are many signals through body language and voice tone. A useful rule of thumb is to simply ask the person.

**Do I want to be helpful to this person?** It is important to be clear about your feelings on this issue. If you really do not want to be any closer to the person, then do not fake it. Do not underestimate the sufferer's ability to detect phoniness. False caring is often resented more than being ignored. To be helpful you must show at least minimal genuine interest in that individual as a person.

**Is it appropriate for me to approach the troubled person?** If your boss is not your personal friend you may be out of line if you declare your concern that your boss is looking sad or troubled. More often, the boundary lines we have with our friends, fellow workers and neighbours are fuzzy. If you are feeling awkward it is sometimes helpful to tactfully ask, *Do you want to talk about what's been happening?* Or you can extend an open offer, *If ever you want to talk to me, I'm available.* You have given them the choice without being intrusive. Typically, the troubled person appreciates an open invitation and can decide on the appropriateness of further conversation.

**How can I help, or be supportive of the troubled person?** Helping can require very little personal involvement. You do not have to diagnose the problem nor do you have to be a therapist. The simple act of taking time to listen and to allow the person the right to feel bad, provides immediate and effective support. It is often hard to be an active listener as we may be distracted by other demands on our time. Corridors and lunch rooms are not the best places to listen. So find a private location in which to talk with the troubled person. This can be as informal as asking the person to give you a call after work.

**Who am I doing this for?** Being helpful means not being meddlesome or nosy. Nor does it mean having 'a holier than thou' attitude. Some individuals, sadly, become more fixated on their own ego needs and the positive feelings they generate for themselves when they think they are being helpful. Only help others when asked and then only to the extent you are able.



## Suggestions for Effective Listening

When in doubt, a good starting point in deciding how to respond to someone is to ask yourself the question, *what sort of support do I need or want when I'm upset?* Some people love hugs and love to give them. Others cringe at the thought.

Here are some suggestions and warnings. Remember, as with any suggestions they may not apply in all situations. For example, in terms of the suggestion not to offer advice, the troubled person may actually want and need some immediate advice and you may have appropriate advice to give.

### Things to Do

- Accept the person's feelings for what they are. The sadness or anger may seem illogical, but for them it is real.
- Keep the focus on the immediate issues. There is no need to suddenly make any long term plans, nor is it realistic to pursue the many old issues the person may have stockpiled. *How are you set up for tonight?* is a lot more helpful question to ask someone who is recently separated than *What plans do you have for next year?*
- Allow silence. It is okay to have nothing to say. We sometimes reverberate with some of the impatience or pain we see in the other person. Resisting our anxious need to talk helps us to listen more effectively.
- Be genuine. If you do not know the answer to the person's question, it is okay to say, *I don't know*. If you have had a similar (not exactly the same) experience, feel free to briefly share it.
- Encourage the person to seek additional help or support. This may mean suggesting the Employee Assistance Program, or nudging the person to contact additional friends or family.

### Things to Watch Out For

- Avoid giving reassuring answers. No one really knows what tomorrow will bring. Sometimes things really do get worse before they get better.
- *You're the only person I can talk to*. Do not buy into this. You may be a comfortable and helpful person to talk to, but you are not the only one.
- Only offer the support you are genuinely prepared to deliver. If you really do not want a call at 2:30 am, then do not say, *Call me anytime you need someone to talk with*.
- Do not be an **enabler**. Do not feel that you have to rescue the individual by doing things for him or being the person's protector. For example, 'covering' for an absent or tardy alcoholic will eventually wear you out and in the end, it does not help the alcoholic come to terms with his problem.

## A Few Words About Crisis Situations

A crisis is different from an emergency. Emergencies require immediate action, typically from trained professionals. Drug overdoses and car accidents are common examples. A crisis may be defined as a situation where stress has reached a point where normal coping breaks down. A suspension from work, a recent separation, or an individual confronting their drug dependency can be a crisis. There is upheaval and pain, but not an immediate threat to life.

Troubled people often want their crisis resolved now.

Yet the crisis took a while to develop and it may take some time for the situation to improve.

No one can fix the pain of a broken heart, nor save a fellow worker from his own work record.

As helpers, we need to avoid getting pulled into the drama of crises.