

How Co-Workers Can Be Supportive

What can you do when a co-worker is either the victim of or a witness to a traumatic event? You may feel awkward or embarrassed. You may have your own feelings about the event that are difficult to resolve. Most of all, you may simply feel that you don't know what to say. Tips below may help you formulate a response that shows your co-workers that you care and want to be supportive.

Acknowledge the event. Pretending that nothing happened may seem like the easiest thing to do, but it won't help affected individuals recover. You may want to acknowledge the event with a small ritual, such as sending flowers or making a donation.

Don't ask questions; just listen. Asking detailed questions about what happened usually comes across as ghoulish and intrusive. If your co-worker wants to talk about the event, just listen. He or she may repeat the details many times; this is often an important part of healing. But if he or she is not yet ready to talk about it, don't push.

Offer long-term emotional support. It takes longer to recover from a trauma than most people realize. For instance, a year might seem like enough time to "get over it;" yet their first anniversary is often very difficult for people.

Become involved in the re-entry process. When your co-worker returns to work, you will have natural concerns about his or her ability to work, how he or she will look, whether he or she will want to talk about the event, etc. If appropriate, get involved in planning for your co-worker's return.

Offer practical support. Instead of the catch-all. "If there's anything I can do..." offer to do specific things such as giving rides to and from work, run errands, pick up part of their workload (check with the boss first) or other favors.

Watch for signs of abnormal reactions. Behavior that would usually be considered strange is quite normal at a time like this: irrational anger, crying spells, a period of seeming to be okay followed by a relapse, etc. But if your co-worker seems to be seriously disturbed, if the symptoms go on for weeks, and if he or she is not on counseling, then the manager or EAP counselor may need to get involved.

What to Say:

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"This must be very painful for you."

"Don't worry about work while you're gone; we'll take care of things for you."

"We're glad to have you back."

What not to say:

"I understand how you feel." (You may think you do, but to a victim, his or her pain is unique.)

"What happened? You'll feel better if you talk about it."

"When this happened to me..." (Even if you had an identical experience, the victim's need to talk about his or her own trauma is probably greater than the need to listen to other people's experiences.)

