Being helpful to someone who has experienced a traumatic event



If one of your colleagues or someone you're close to is witness to or part of a traumatic event, he or she will experience a range of emotions and reactions in the days and months to follow.

Recognize where they're at

Understand that trauma can have some pretty significant effects on people. These can include:

- Anxiety
- Fear
- Guilt
- Grief
- Depression
- Sadness
- Feeling lost, abandoned or isolated
- Worrying about others
- Wanting to limit contact with others
- Anger
- Irritability
- Feeling numb, startled or shocked

Tips and tools you can use

While many of us feel unsure about how we can help in circumstances such as these, one of the most valuable—and easiest—things we can do is to simply be there to listen. For those who have experienced a traumatic event, talking is one of the best remedies for unloading overwhelming feelings and emotions.

Although listening in and of itself may sound easy enough, there are a number of key things you can do, especially for someone who has been through a traumatic experience. Here are some great tips to consider:

- **Refine your listening skills.**
- **Stop talking.** You can't listen while you're talking.
- **Empathize.** Put yourself in the other person's shoes.
- **Make understanding your goal.** Remember that you're not trying to determine right or wrong—you're trying to get a clear picture of ideas and feelings.
- **Ask questions**—especially questions that prompt the giving of more information and detail. Ask for clarification, missing pieces and specific facts. Make sure that the questions you're asking don't come across as judgmental in any way.
- **Listen carefully** to the answers given in response.
- **Don't interrupt.**
- **Don't formulate a response before the other person has finished talking.**
- **Make eye contact.**
- **Provide acknowledgment of your attentiveness** through nods, smiles and empathetic sounds.

- **Listen actively.** Check your understanding by repeating back the main points as you've heard them.
- **Listen for what is missing.** What information has been left out that could give you a clearer picture?
- **Reaching Out**

As well as being helpful and supportive by offering to lend an ear, if you have the energy and the interest, why not:

- Ask the person how you can help and try to take your lead from him or her
- Be non-judgmental, empathetic, and genuine
- Offer any assistance that you feel comfortable giving
- Provide opportunities for the person to express their thoughts and concerns, but avoid pressure

While trying to help, be aware of your own thoughts and feelings. Avoid making their experience your own. Also be careful never take hope away or offer false hope.

If you are a supervisor

- Talk to other employees about the event and the circumstances leading up to it, in a supportive, non-judgmental manner.
- Ensure that the individuals directly affected by the trauma are not left alone at home. A family member or friend should be there at all times.
- Request a group debriefing session, if appropriate.

Coping strategies

- Encourage your friend or colleague to devote more time to rest and relaxation. Although this may seem difficult right now, it's important to give the body and mind time to repair themselves.
- If your friend or colleague has recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks, reiterate that this is perfectly normal and that there is no need to fight them. These memories and images will decrease over time and should become less painful.
- Well-balanced and regular meals are important right now. If your friend or colleague is back at work, suggest going out for lunch together or sharing lunch at the office.
- The person should aim to keep sugar intake low right now and to watch that caffeine consumption doesn't rise. Alcohol and drugs should be avoided.
- Staying active can help to reduce stress levels.
- Encourage the person to talk about his or her feelings. Being there to listen is a great gift to people who have experienced trauma.
- If your colleague is suffering great emotional pain, professional support can offer coping strategies.

As much as you’re interested in helping out, do be careful to respect the person’s need for privacy and time alone.

When a friend or colleague goes through a traumatic event, you may have mixed feelings about the best approach to take. Although people react to traumatic events in different ways, most of us experience a range of similar feelings and experiences at some point during the process. Gaining a little understanding of these typical reactions and challenges can help you give friends and colleagues the support they need following trauma.