

How Co-Workers Can be Supportive

What can you do when a co-worker is either the victim of or 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. The tips below may help you formulate a response that shows your co-worker 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 come 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 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 the 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 give rides to and from work, run errands, pick up part of their workload, watch their children, 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/she is not involved in counseling, then the CISM Team or EAP Counselor may need to get involved to help the individual.

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 manage without 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/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, your co-workers need to talk about his/her own trauma is probably greater than the need to listen to other people's experiences.)