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Career Compass No. 106: Supporting a Colleague in Distress

As mental issues become more evident in our organizations, how do we reach out to a colleague experiencing distress and provide support, even if we have no training to help them?

By Dr. Frank Benest | Feb 27, 2024 | ARTICLE

I'm a division head in a county parks and recreation department. I have a colleague who is another division manager in our department. We see each other in-person at the office three days a week or during Zoom meetings. We often work together on various project teams, and we are friendly. In the past several months, my colleague is struggling and seems quite lonely, distressed, and certainly not himself. I have also observed that his performance has begun to suffer.



The county executive and the HR director have both expressed the need to support employees with mental health difficulties. While I feel badly for my coworker and want to be supportive, I don't know how.

As a manager and colleague, I see more and more instances of people struggling with mental health issues; however, I have no training to respond.

To support my colleague, can you suggest some things that I can do?

Response

I commend you for wanting to support your colleague.

You are correct that the need to support employees with mental health or emotional difficulties is a growing phenomenon that all organizations (including local governments) can no longer ignore. It used to be that employers felt that people's personal lives were not their business. Employees also felt that work and personal lives were two different spheres.

All of these attitudes have changed. Work and life are more blended than ever. Ever since COVID, it has become apparent that mental health issues have become organizational concerns. Moreover, employees now expect their organizations to demonstrate a caring attitude toward them and their families. (See Jim Harter, "[Leaders: Ignore Employee Well-Being at Your Own Risk](#)," [gallup.com, July 6, 2023](#).)

What's the why?

Before we address "what" you should do or "how" you should do it, there must be a strong "why" for responding to the needs of your coworker and demonstrating that you care.

First, it is clear that the organization has an interest in the employee and his productivity. To the extent that mental health problems are negatively impacting your colleague's performance (and perhaps the overall performance of his division), the organization should provide resources and otherwise support the employee and his family.

Second, Gallup research has demonstrated that key factors driving productivity, commitment, engagement, and retention are caring attitudes and behaviors on the part of the organization ("my organization cares about my well-being") and on the part of managers and coworkers ("someone at work cares about me"). (See [Jim Harter, "Leaders: Ignore Employee Well-Being at Your Own Risk," gallup.com, July 6, 2023](#).)

Three-quarters of all employees surveyed reported at least one mental health problem.

Third, your basic humanity and connection to the struggling coworker demand that you reach out and respond to the person. Even though you may find it difficult to engage your colleague, you will make a positive difference in the life of your coworker by merely showing empathy and compassion.

How big of an issue is mental health?

Consider the following results from various surveys:

- A total of 63% of all employees surveyed said their life has been forever changed by the pandemic, reporting mental health problems, less physical activity, sleep problems, and

increased reliance on unhealthy habits (see American Psychology Association 2022 [“Stress in America Poll,”](#)

- Three-quarters of all employees surveyed reported at least one mental health problem (see [Hise Gibson, “How Workplace Wellness Programs Can Give Employees the Energy Boost They Need,” Harvard Business School Week, Aug 28, 2023.](#))
- A total of 36% of respondents to a Harvard survey reported serious loneliness—feeling lonely “frequently” or “almost all the time or all the time” (see [“Making Caring Common” Project.](#) The U.S. Surgeon General just issued an [advisory report](#) documenting this epidemic of loneliness.
- A total of 77% of employers are seeing increased mental health issues in 2023, such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (see [Ryan Golden, HR Dive newsletter, Aug 24, 2023.](#))
- A total of 94% of executives want to provide increased mental health support but only 12% of employees have talked to their managers about their mental health (see [Alana Warburton-Whitehead, “What’s Holding Back Mental Health Conversations at Work?” HR Director newsletter, July 17, 2023.](#))
- While 87% of employees have access to some mental and emotional well-being resources, only 23% use them (see [Marissa Plescia, “Survey: 85% of Employees Don’t Use Their Mental Health Benefits, MedCityNews, July 18, 2023.](#))
- Only 25% of U.S. employees feel strongly that their employer cares about their well-being (See [Jim Harter, “Leaders: Ignore Employee Well-Being at Your Own Risk,” gallup.com, July 6, 2023.](#))

What can lead to distress?

Our work and personal lives are often difficult and complicated. So, a lot of things can be a source of distress, especially if one is experiencing a number of problems or challenges. Sources of distress may include:

- An oversized and unmanageable workload, especially if the agency has lost staffing or there is a lot of staff churn.
- Little autonomy or flexibility in how or when to do one’s work. (Much research suggests that a lack of autonomy is a major contributor to burnout. That’s why managers who have more autonomy than nonmanagers are a bit less likely, all things considered, to become burned out.) (See [Erin Kelly et al, “7 Strategies to Improve Your Employees’ Health and Well-Being,” hbr.org, Oct 12, 2021.](#))
- Physical health problems (for example, long COVID, obesity).
- Loss of a loved one (see my case study below).
- A failed relationship.
- Few if any friendships.
- Financial or legal problems.
- Childcare or elder care difficulties.
- Substance abuse.
- Angry customers or service users.
- Workplace bullying.
- Blame-oriented, overly partisan elected officials who abuse staff.

Only a trained mental health professional can adequately explore the underlying source of distress and assist the person with the mental health problem in doing something to ameliorate the distress. However, a supportive colleague can be of great value to the person in distress.

How do you get started?

Like you, I'm not an expert in helping people with mental health or emotional difficulties; however, I know how to be a good friend and coach.

The basic approach for a supportive colleague like you is to reach out in a nonjudgmental way and connect with your coworker, engage the person in respectful conversations, gently ask questions, and most importantly, demonstrate empathy and compassion.

Empathy is feeling what others feel by putting yourself in their shoes.

Empathy is not sympathy which leads you to feel sorry for the difficulties of others. Rather, empathy is characterized by your ability to see the world through the eyes of the other person and understand and acknowledge their unique hopes, fears, and challenges. (See [Career Compass #86 "Empathy Is a Superpower."](#))

Compassion is related to empathy but different. Empathy is feeling what others feel by putting yourself in their shoes. Empathy may immobilize you so there is no constructive action. Compassion requires that you respond appropriately through your actions as a colleague or friend. (See [Career Compass #67 "Effective Leaders Start with Compassion."](#))

By showing empathy and compassion, you demonstrate that you care.

What steps can you take?

People in distress often withdraw from others. Among a number of challenges, the pandemic significantly reduced many of our "weak" social ties, including those with colleagues. Weak ties are low-stake relationships that help maintain our sense of well-being. Therefore, you are making a positive difference if you connect with your colleague and help your coworker connect with others.

Here is a sequence of steps that might be helpful:

- 1. Reach out and connect.**

Initially, you can stop by your colleague's office or arrive early to an in-person or Zoom meeting or stay after the meeting to start a conversation. The initial conversation should be small talk or chit-chat. Ask about non-work stuff, such as family, sports, vacations, or hobbies. Share similar information about your non-work self.

2. **Invite the other person for coffee or a drink after work or a breaktime walk.**
Continue sharing non-work information about yourself; ask about your colleague's personal life.
3. **Create a safe environment to inquire about the person's distress.**
To create "safety" for a more direct conversation about your colleague's challenges, get away from the office and find a private place. By sharing information about yourself, especially your non-work self, you model openness. To the extent that you can share a few difficulties that you face, you also model vulnerability. Openness and vulnerability create a measure of safety for the other person to share.
4. **Gently ask questions.**
As a colleague friend, you can gently inquire about the source of the distress by saying to your co-worker: "I sense that lately you've been troubled or pretty stressed out. I'm worried about you. May I ask what have you been experiencing? What are you feeling?" If you get permission or a sense that it is okay to proceed, you can gently continue. If the person says, "I'm fine," you can ask: "Are you sure? You don't seem like your normal self. What are you experiencing?" Or, if the person's response is superficial, you can say: "Tell me more." (Note: Be conscious of power imbalances. If you supervise the person, the person may not feel comfortable sharing their distress.)
5. **Listen and acknowledge.**
You can listen intently, ask questions to ensure that you understand, summarize what you hear, and acknowledge that the person is having a difficult time.
6. **Don't try to solve the problem.**
For me, as a male and long-time manager, I love to solve other people's problems. Resist the temptation. During your offsite conversation and subsequent conversations, you might ask: "To minimize your distress, what is one step that you might take?" You should tolerate some silence and allow the other person the time to process a response. If the person can't seem to take any action, you might ask: "May I offer one possible option as a first step?" If the person seems open to consider an action step, you can say: "Have you considered _____?" However, if your coworker is overwhelmed or not ready to address or minimize their distress, you are still making a positive difference by simply being there and acknowledging their difficult time.
7. **Offer assistance.**
Without taking responsibility away from your colleague, you can then ask: "How can I support you?" This support can be a suggested resource for the other person, such as an Employee Assistance Program, grief support group, or an employee resource group.
8. **Find out if there is a support system.**
You might ask: "Who is there for you to talk to about your difficulties?" and "Who might support you or further support you?"
9. **Suggest that the colleague reconnect with something they love to do.**
As your coworker withdraws, he may not stay involved with something he loves to do outside of work. Therefore, you may want to encourage your colleague to practice "active rest." This is an activity that actively fuels the person's energy, such as a creative hobby or activity (water coloring, writing, fishing) or reconnecting with friends.
10. **Follow-up, stay connected, and promote a sense of belonging.**
Reach out again to stay connected and provide ongoing social support. You can invite your colleague to another coffee, lunch or walk. Or go to the gym together. If the person is feeling lonely, you might suggest that your colleague join you in attending a "lunch and learn" event or a regional professional meeting. Or invite another colleague to join both

of you for lunch. Or, as suggested, you can provide specific information about an appropriate resource.

In addition to reaching out to the colleague in need and supporting them, you have a role in advocating that top management develop an organizational infrastructure to assist employees with mental health struggles. You can advocate for organizational programs (see below) by bringing up this important issue with your department head, the HR director, the county executive, and the board of directors of the association that represents the managers group in the county.

Frank's Mental Health Difficulties

In 2004, while I served as city manager of Palo Alto, California, my wife Pam unexpectedly died. Not only did I lose my life partner, but I had no idea how to adequately care for my two small children Noah (age 10) and Leila (age 6). I was overcome with grief and incapacitated.

One colleague sat down with me and said she'd help me find a nanny so I could continue as city manager.

Another colleague/friend offered to coordinate the Catholic memorial mass for Pam (Pam was an observant Catholic, I'm Jewish). In the aftermath of Pam's death, the same colleague reached out to me and asked if I had secured any grief support services for me and my children. I resisted the suggestion until after our third or fourth conversation. I finally contacted the local Kara Grief Support Network. I got actively involved in a widow/widower support group, and my kids joined a play group for children who lost a parent. These services literally saved our lives.

Several months later, I was diagnosed with a life-threatening cancer and took leave from work to undergo radiation and chemotherapy. A colleague who really wasn't a close friend at the time showed up at my front door on several Saturday mornings with a box of Krispy Kreme donuts for me and the kids. He then engaged me in conversation so I could stay connected and just process my experience.

My children and I survived. I am forever grateful to my colleagues.

What can the organization do?

To address mental health issues in the workplace, colleagues must reach out and support coworkers in distress. It's necessary but insufficient. Top management must ensure the mental health resources are in place; there is a safe environment to discuss mental health challenges; and programs are accessible and promoted.

To do so, top management must take a hard self-critical look at the organization and determine if workplace issues are causing or exacerbating mental health problems experienced by employees. For example, if the organization has lost a lot of staff yet new demands keep being added to workloads, these untenable workloads might be a

source of considerable distress. Likewise, if employees are not provided much autonomy and flexibility in how the work is done or where or when it is done, this lack of control may lead to burnout. If employees are not experiencing a sense of belonging or appreciation, the organization needs to evaluate its “employee experience.” Top management must not only recognize these kinds of workplace stressors but do something about it.

In addition, to address mental health issues, top management can take a variety of interrelated actions. First of all, top management must identify employee well-being as a key organizational value. Again, Gallup has identified “My organization cares about my well-being” as a key driver of employee engagement, productivity, and retention. (See [Jim Harter, “Leaders: Ignore Employee Well-Being at Your Own Risk,” *gallup.com*, July 6, 2023.](#))

Top management must identify employee well-being as a key organizational value.

Second, to make it safe to talk about mental health issues, top managers should model openness and vulnerability as they discuss their own personal mental health challenges. These efforts can reduce the stigma associated with acknowledging our mental health challenges. When I was city manager in Palo Alto, I was notified of anyone who lost a loved one. I then wrote a personal note to the employee, sharing my own experience with grief and offering support.

Third, top management must ensure that the organization’s health insurance plan adequately covers mental health issues.

Fourth, managers need to be trained in how to recognize employees in distress, engage them in conversation about their challenges, and offer resources and support.

Fifth, responsive organizations need to develop or contract for a variety of program resources and actively promote the programs. These might include:

- **Workshops and Other Resources.** The organization can provide workshops on stress management, suicide prevention, sleep management, and the like, as well as offer online mental health resources for employees and families on its intranet site.
- **Employee Assistance Program.** EAPs are provided by an outside agency that assesses problems and makes appropriate referrals to service providers for issues like substance misuse, child or elder care, relationship challenges, financial or legal problems, and traumatic events like workplace violence. Confidential services are often delivered to the employee or family members by phone, video-based counseling, online chatting, email interactions, or face-to-face. Employers pay a per employee fee every month for every employee in the organization or the EAP or service providers are part of a comprehensive health insurance plan. It is imperative that supervisors and managers are trained in how to use the EAP and make referrals.
- **Employee Resource Groups.** An ERG is a workplace group where employees voluntarily join based on shared identities, interests, and/or needs. For instance, an ERG could be a

working parent's group, women's network, moms returning to work, and or an ethnic-based or gender-identity group. ERGs provide social support and learning and development opportunities.

- Mental Health “First Responders” Program. The organization can identify and train appropriate staff from across the organization to serve as “first responders” or peer counselors for those in distress. Many public safety agencies have organized peer counseling programs for those dealing with substance abuse, trauma, or other mental health problems.
- First Aid classes offered by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. Go to [What You Learn - Mental Health First Aid](#) and provide the zip code for a class nearby.)

Little things have a big impact

Our public service work is difficult, and our personal lives are complicated. At one time or another, we might experience different kinds of distress. Organizational leaders now recognize that mental health issues can undercut employee engagement and productivity. Moreover, an organization that does not demonstrate that it cares for the well-being of employees is apt to lose its talent.

By demonstrating that we care, we are providing the wonderful “gift” of ourselves.

In addition, employees now expect that their local government agencies show in tangible ways that top management cares about them and their families.

As individuals, our human connection to colleagues demands that we reach out and offer support and encouragement. By demonstrating that we care, we are providing the wonderful “gift” of ourselves. Small things make a big difference.



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