

When a Colleague is Unwell
HELPING OUT
by Claudette Coombs

We may all have had the experience of trying to decide what to do when a colleague becomes ill. How do we help? How do we respect privacy and still show our concern? To be of genuine help to a colleague we must be prepared to confirm the need and explore the appropriate use of our time, talents and motivation since helping out isn't always convenient and doesn't always take the form we want to give!

What stops us?

Too often our good intentions remain just that --; intentions without action. It is not the lack of desire that holds us back, nor is it inadequate commitment. Rather, it may be any combination of personal factors.

A fear that we might say or do the "wrong" thing sometimes freezes us into inaction. We would prefer not making contact at all. To counter this very real fear we don't have to look past our own experiences. Take a minute to remember how comforting it felt to have a colleague or friend acknowledge a personal pain. No, they could not take away the pain nor change the circumstances but their contact showed that they cared and that made a difference in how we felt.

There are also times when confronting the health issues of a colleague may cause us to reflect on concerns about our own health, or that of a family member. Even if we are not yet ready to deal with that, we can accept that spending time with the colleague may better prepare us to face personal trials. Using a little creativity, we can find ways to help which do not infringe upon our private thoughts.

Daily we encounter stories of sadness or tragedy. We relate to the misfortune of others and are grateful for our blessings. We feel compelled by a sense of compassion to do something, yet, we question: "What gives me the right to impose myself on someone?" Think again. Is there something you can do to make the burden lighter? Could your expression of compassion be felt and understood by someone in need? If you answer yes to either of these, don't rob others of your kindness.

We may withhold our emotional support because we are unsure of how we will react. Seeing a colleague's inescapable pain leaves us feeling uncomfortable, helpless and out of control. We may even hold ourselves responsible for not being able to make things better. This personal sensitivity sometimes causes us to avoid making contact if we believe that we have nothing to offer. It is important for us to relinquish the role of problem-solver. Often a colleague merely wants recognition from us, not a solution.

Moving beyond thought and into action can be accomplished, in part by knowing ... knowing what will help; knowing what is expected of us; knowing what to expect from our colleague; and, knowing that our involvement can make a difference.

Where do we start?

The first priority is to consider what the colleague wants and needs. We each have something to offer and, fortunately, we each have special talents despite our personal fears. Successfully matching our "gifts" with our colleague's needs doesn't have to be a difficult process if we do some groundwork first. Ensuring the proper match creates an atmosphere where we are truly helping a friend and we feel good about it. For those of us who are less comfortable making individual contact, we can occasionally plan and act in a group. Whatever our hesitancy, it shouldn't prevent us from doing what our hearts tell us is important to do.

We can offer to help at different levels but we must be sensitive to other influences if assistance is not readily accepted. Let's start with the basics, if a colleague is in great (temporary) physical distress, he/she may not be interested in sitting up and casually chatting. However, if physical distress is severe and long-term, a period of distraction might be greatly appreciated.

Although physical needs must be considered before others, all needs should be addressed in turn.

What is needed?

Considering the varying needs of our unwell colleague, we identify areas where we can use personal talents and abilities to help. We may not be the greatest conversationalist but we may make great muffins or enjoy driving or running errands. If we look closely we are sure to find an area where our ability matches a need.

PHYSICAL. The easiest needs to meet are generally the practical, physical needs. The ill person may be preoccupied and unable to focus if physical comfort, personal hygiene, meal preparation, housework, or bill paying are not met. Staff can plan a rotating list to deliver meals. They could also arrange outings for the teacher's young children or take responsibility for being the "taxi service". One teacher expressed admiration and wonder for school friends who used their "casual day" funds to pay for house cleaning services each week. Another teacher felt very special and close to each staff member when the staff brought a large basket filled with a variety of treats and home-made goodies. Everyone contributed without being intrusive. Students often feel the same desire for involvement and can also be part of these initiatives.

PSYCHOLOGICAL. This area usually causes us the most personal turmoil. We want to bring cheer and hope but sometimes face a bleak reality. We then emphasize daily progress and mastery of daily routines. Each of us must feel secure in our place within society --; as a teacher, parent, partner, friend, or any other role which we fill. We are reassured of our continued value and contribution when we are called upon to function in one of our roles. One teacher felt grateful when she was requested to provide a critique of a new program to be introduced. She was able to complete the task over a period of time and share her wealth of experience and expertise.

SOCIAL. Being connected is extremely important. We need to feel accepted, significant to others, and most of all, not forgotten. Illness often brings a sense of isolation. Making brief, regular contacts by phone, e-mail or staff visits can facilitate social contact that might otherwise be neglected or sporadic.

PROFESSIONAL. After years of training and much time and energy, we want to maintain our personal image as teachers. Being removed from the classroom for any length of time can adversely affect us. Separation gives a sense of being disconnected and, maybe even, dispensable. News of school activities, visits to the classroom or mail can reaffirm the colleague's place in school life.

SELF. Respect and admiration are valued characteristics in our lives. In the past the teacher has functioned as a meaningful member of a team: offering advice; providing direction; and supporting colleagues. That doesn't have to end. There will be days when the colleague would still enjoy that role. You can give him/her the opportunity.

Cautions

In a prolonged or unpredictable illness, emotions run high. Allow yourself to express feelings while still remaining positive and hopeful. Showing emotion should not be equated with negativity or hopelessness. Instead, it is a revelation of the colleague's value to you.

It is necessary to be attentive to the colleague's current physical condition and emotional status. There may be times when a personal visit is "just what is needed" while at other times, the colleague cannot cope with such an interaction. Don't give up. The best way to determine whether or not a specific act is suitable today, is to ask! Even if things have been planned, it may be wise to call ahead to confirm that the plans are still convenient.

In conclusion, we all benefit if we don't hide our talents but instead let them shine and bring joy to the giver and receiver.

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