Tips for Helping Troubled Co-Workers

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As Tucson approaches the first anniversary of the Jan. 8 shootings that killed six people and wounded 13 more, including U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, many people are reminded of the tragic event that took an emotional toll on the entire community.

"We're keenly aware of the anniversary," said Life & Work Connections counselor Dave Swihart [1].

(See a listing of events commemorating the Jan. 8 anniversary [2] on the UA Master Calendar.)

After the shootings, Swihart said, he didn't see an increase in the number of people who came to talk to him so much as an increase in how intensely people felt the things that were happening in their lives.

A year later, "if we see people that are really triggered by itâ€?I don't think it will be a bunch of people, but we are watching and are aware of the situation â€?people can call, come in and talk."

That offer also stands for anyone facing any kind of emotional struggle, whether it stems from a public tragedy or a very personal one. And it's an ongoing resource that employees can make use of, even if it's for a co-worker and not themselves.

With a good number of University of Arizona employees spending more time with their co-workers than their own families, it's sometimes easy to see when a colleague is struggling. But knowing what to do â€? or say â€? can be very hard. Â

Swihart and other UA experts who work with people in crisis situations say that gently approaching a co-worker who seems to be struggling emotionally is a good way to start.

But tread lightly.

"It does a lot depend on the relationship," said Cathy Nicholson [3], director of Human Resources for the Arizona Health Sciences Center [4]. "If the person is subordinate to you, that can be dangerous. If the person is someone to whom you report, that's a very obvious danger."

People in either position could misinterpret your intentions, causing unnecessary conflict.

A good approach in any instance, Nicholson said, is to say something such as, "You seem a little down lately. I don't know if you know this, but we have a great Employee Assistance Program [5]. Here's a brochure I found lying around."
If the person is a subordinate, and the problem is affecting his or her work, it's important to mention that work is being affected and give the person a chance to get help by giving the brochure, she said.

The Employee Assistance Program is carried out by Life & Work Connections [6], and Nicholson said the counselors there "can be lifesavers, truly."

The program offers free, short-term counseling to employees and is totally confidential within legal limits. A male or female counselor are available to talk things through and offer referrals for people who need the next level of care.

"I don't think there's anything they haven't heard," she said.

Employees also might want to contact Swihart [1] before approaching a troubled colleague, she said, to get advice and encouragement about the best way to proceed without seeming overly intrusive.

The Life & Work Connections website also features a flowchart on what to do when you are concerned about someone's mental health [7].

Like Nicholson, Swihart said the nature of the relationship you have with the person is important in determining how to approach them.

Some people are good friends with their supervisors, while for others there is more of a rigid hierarchy, he said.

Generally, it's good to inquire, "Hey, you look like you're preoccupied or thinking about something. Are you OK? Is there anything I can do?" Swihart said.

As a rule of thumb, you want to approach the person privately, whether that's in the office or during a lunch outing. Privacy shows concern and empathy, he said.

"Let their response determine what you do or don't do next. If they say they're fine, it's important to respect that," he said.

Emergency and trauma nurse Wanda Larson [8], who teaches in the College of Nursing [9] and has trained paramedics for about 30 years, has a somewhat different take.

She works with people such as paramedics, emergency nurses and police officers who see a lot of traumatic activity as part of their regular jobs. As a result, people in those lines of work develop certain coping strategies to help them do their jobs well, Larson said.

"When those coping strategies fail, it can be very bewildering," she said.

Whether co-workers are employed in high-stress positions or not, it's important for teammates to notice when one isn't doing well and to realize when normal coping isn't working.

"Sometimes it's just a matter of reframing the event with them," Larson said.

With a few words, a person can help a struggling colleague to see a situation as a challenge that can be overcome instead of as a threat of some kind, she said.
If reframing doesn't work, it's good for the person to take 10-15 minutes to regroup, either by getting through whatever is going on or by disengaging from the activity immediately and going for a brisk walk or doing a quiet activity with structured breathing, she said.

These techniques, while employed by people such as first responders in high-stress environments, are good to suggest even for people who don't work in those environments, she said.

If further help is needed, Larson said Life & Work Connections offers peer support as well as the Employee Assistance Program.

Echoing Nicholson and Swihart, she said first and foremost it's important to "engage on a human level with them."

She had a colleague who seemed quiet during the holidays, and just by talking a little bit she found out the person recently had an important relationship fall apart.

"Sometimes it's a walk and a talk and a cup of coffee," she said.

She added that if you're concerned about overstepping your bounds in an office hierarchy—say, approaching your boss who seems troubled—you probably at least know someone the boss is comfortable talking to, and you might gently mention to that person, "I wonder if so-and-so is having a bad day."

Nicholson said it's important not to jump to conclusions about people and not to diagnose what could be happening with them.

People are quick to assume others have substance abuse issues, she said, when it could be family issues instead.

If a person says something along the lines of just wanting to "end it all," a concerned colleague should contact Life & Work Connections or Human Resources so they can determine whether a threat assessment is necessary and guide that person into getting the appropriate help, Nicholson said.

If the threat seems more imminent and the person appears to be leaving to do something drastic, call 911 and tell the operator what you heard and what you're worried about, she said.

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