Supporting Coworkers
Anticipating Job Loss

Even if you’ve been spared during a layoff, it’s no fun seeing someone you care about thrown into emotional upheaval because they are worried about job loss. It’s even more distressing when it’s someone you work with.

Of course you want to help, but what do you say? You know that your job is secure, so will your reassurances and sympathies just cause resentment?

Here’s the short answer: If you care about this person, you can offer support even if it is uncomfortable. Staying silent or ignoring the elephant in the room will only make things worse for your coworker.

Dealing With The Bad News

Hearing that they may be let go is devastating and can leave employees in a state of shock. Keep your strategy simple while your coworker processes the news – reach out, make yourself available, and listen. That’s it. Doing anything else during this time is counter-productive.

If job loss is a possibility rather than a certainty, help your coworker stay focused on day-to-day job duties. Distraction and undue worry turn possible outcomes into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Long-Term Care Strategies

After the initial shock of the news has passed, you’ll have more ways to provide a helping hand. There are two ways to support your coworker – emotionally and practically. You should do both.

Emotional Support

• Put it into perspective: It’s hard to see the big picture when you’re scared and angry. Your coworker will be both. Help your coworker avoid obsessing over worse-case, doomsday scenarios.
• Keep it real: Maintaining perspective does not mean putting a happy face on bad events. Impending job loss is no picnic. Acknowledge and respect your coworker’s feelings.
• Build self-esteem: Losing your job is a tremendous emotional blow. Relentlessly build up your coworker with positive affirmations and continuous reminders of her abilities and accomplishments.
• Intervene to deter negativity: Don’t feed into her anger and resentment by being your coworker’s venting buddy. Instead, steer conversations into positive territory. Shield your coworker from doom-and-gloom peers.
• Communicate carefully: Don’t ask open questions such as, “How will you pay the mortgage?” Instead, gently probe areas of concern and offer to help: “Is your resume current? Would you like help with that? Would you like me to put you in touch with a good service? Have you contacted the EAP? They are our resource experts.”

Tips For Support

Make an action plan: Get specific! Taking care of details is empowering. Help your coworker prepare a list of concerns and start problem-solving.
• Help with budgeting: Encourage your coworker to start slashing expenses now, instead of waiting.
• Use your network: Get the word out early that your coworker will be available for hire and start connecting him or her with professionals in your network.
• Suggest retraining: Find out what your coworker’s potential employers are looking for and help your coworker uncover areas of weakness that can be improved upon before beginning the job search.
• Help identify your coworker’s unique strengths and talents. Everyone has them, but they’re usually more easily spotted by outsiders. Clarifying core competencies makes it possible to expand job searches into new, sometimes surprising areas that offer better prospects.
• Offer your time and/or expertise: Solve at least one problem for your coworker. Does your coworker need instructions on how to use a job search site? What about help with child care while interviewing for a new job? Find out where you can help, and make a commitment to do so.

Heads-Up For Those Helping

After the initial burst of sympathy and concern, support from others often dries up, so check in often with your coworker, both at work and at home (if you have a close relationship).

Monitor for signs of listlessness, disengagement, or frequently missing work, and intervene if there’s a problem by pointing your coworker to your Employee Assistance Program.

This information is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or healthcare provider. Please consult your health care provider or EAP for advice about a personal concern or medical condition.