

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

Denise P. Kalm
DPK Coaching

Your friend calls you and says, “I just got laid off.” Now what? What do you say? Unless you have been there, it can be hard to know how best to support a person in this situation. Like all extremely stressful situations, even the most well-balanced individual may find themselves reacting in ways they never expected. Your friend needs support now, so you need to understand what they are going through, so you can find the right words and actions. Most people consider losing a job a major loss in their lives and will experience Kubler-Ross’ Stages of Grief: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance¹.

If you are close, you will likely hear this news soon after he gets the call. At this stage, shock and denial are the most likely emotions felt. It is as if the ground underneath suddenly ceases to exist and you don’t know how to stand up anymore. There is also shame, though nowadays, few people are laid off for cause. A person in the early stages does not need advice; they need a shoulder to “cry” on. Let them talk about it, validate their value and leave it at that. Just be there for them. This can be the hardest, because we have an inherent desire to fix things, to make it better. But at this stage, your friend isn’t even willing to accept that it has happened; they cannot move on yet. In fact, it is very likely that on some level, they expect a call to let them know it was all a huge mistake. Somehow, their name got on the wrong list. Bargaining is also a part of this stage, as it seems possible that this can be reversed or that someone will pull their name off the list and offer them something else. If only they can call the right person, find the right name, do the right thing. Just listen.

Sometimes, in this stage, you will find that your friend’s anger is leading them to consider a career-limiting move, such as telling someone what they really think of them. Friendship means gently talking them down from this. Anger is not the best ingredient for quality decision-making. In the first few days, no matter how scared or angry or desperate a person feels, they should do as little as possible. Sleep well, eat healthy, exercise and try to begin to take those first few steps away from that old role. For some, a job is an identity, which means wondering who you are if you do not have your job. It’s scary. For others, financial worries are top of mind. But action at this stage will lead to nothing good. Unless they move quickly through the stages and achieve acceptance (because perhaps they anticipated this action), they are not ready to consider their next steps.

Call your friend regularly and ask them to spend time with you. Their daily schedule has been tossed to the wind and the feeling of dislocation is extremely disconcerting. Starting to put down activities on their calendar can help. Also, even work-from-home people feel connected to others by the meetings and calls of their day. It is not uncommon to feel very alone at this time.

As your friend moves through the grief process, it is not uncommon for them to try to start looking for a job, or at least, updating their resume. Best practice says you need to lead with your best in a tough

¹ Kubler-Ross, E. “On Death and Dying,” Simon & Schuster, 1997

market. When you aren't through grieving, you aren't going to be able to see your talents in the best light. A good friend can help by letting them know this – helping them to give themselves the time to get through the process, so that they are ready to move on. Bridges can be burned and opportunities lost with a premature attempt at job hunting. And let's face it – in a down market, looking for a job is not pleasurable. Egos are going to get stomped on, rejections will happen and it can be hard to keep a positive outlook.

Though we'd all like to expedite grief, it takes time, especially the first time someone experiences a layoff. The first week is time to begin recovery, handle bureaucratic matters like applying for unemployment. Help a friend allow themselves this time, but do not call it a vacation. Though it IS time off, it is not vacation. The same caution goes to referring to how this experience may turn out to be for the best. Early on, even the most indulgent friend is not going to see how being laid off is a good thing. We all want to make someone feel better, but at this point in the cycle, neither strategy will help.

Depression can be a shock for some. This is where second-guessing can come in – if only I had done X, talked to Y... Reminding someone of all of the amazing things they have done, the qualities that make you value them as a friend and the skills and capabilities they already have can be incredibly helpful. A layoff can feel like you were squashed under the heel of the company you slaved for. It can help to be reminded that the action was not a judgment of their value. In many cases, it is the failure of a management team to understand the value of their people. Do you really want to work for a company that was too dumb to appreciate you? These kinds of approaches can help your friend to move to the next phase. Continue to focus on distractions. No one can think about a bad situation 7x24.

Finally, acceptance comes. This is when you can begin to talk to your friend about the future and how bright it will be for someone this talented. This is where the "everything happens for a reason" statement can make sense to them (though not before). You can offer to help review a resume, write a Linked In recommendation and even suggest jobs. It may be that it takes them several weeks to work through feelings, particularly if this is the first time they have been laid off and if they have a lot invested in the job. But time heals all wounds (though perhaps does not wound all heels).

Being a friend is the best way to help.

“When a friend is in trouble, don't annoy him by asking if there is anything you can do. Think up something appropriate and do it.”

Edgar Watson Howe (1853 - 1937)

For more information on this subject or to arrange personal coaching, please contact me at denise@dpkcoaching.com