If there's anything I can do… Supporting others effectively

We've all said it to a friend, a colleague, a family member or an employee, "If there's anything I can do, just let me know." It's the sort of well-meaning phrase that we utter reflectively before hanging up the phone, anxious to provide support in any way we can.

The reality is that in the midst of a crisis, most people don't have the ability to tell you exactly what they need, and most of us don't have the resources to be able to provide psychological support or counselling.

How, can we best help a friend who is having serious difficulties? How do you open a conversation in a sensitive manner? And what should we avoid saying at all costs?

Recognising a concern

It all starts with recognising a concern or a potential problem. Maybe a friend, colleague, employee or family member has told you directly or confidentially that they are experiencing difficulty or facing challenges, maybe it was someone else offering concern about another. Often it is the observation of uncharacteristic behaviour and non-verbal communications can raise concern.

Some of these early-warning signs can include:

- Loss of sense of humour
- Emotional outbursts
- Becoming aggressive or irritable
- Obvious signs of stress and anxiety
- Difficulty with decision-making and trouble concentrating
- Lack of interest in work/life in general
- Becoming withdrawn
- Unrealistic standards for self and/or others.

Many of us feel apprehensive and unsure about broaching a concern with a friend, colleague, or family member, particularly if you are concerned about their possible response. There are a few simple things you can do to make the process easier on you both.

Approach gently and thoughtfully

Approach the person at the earliest convenience, making sure that you have a private place and plenty of time for discussion.

Make it safe

Make your motives crystal clear—and don't just create present safety—create it for the likely future conversations you'll hold. Assure them of privacy – but don't swear yourself to secrecy.

Make it about them not you

When someone ignores or rejects advice or support, it's easy to take it personally. You can tell you're taking it personally when you start feeling hurt and angry rather than concerned and fearful. It's so easy to begin with well-intended motives, but let them drift into a desire to control others—without even being aware of it. Be aware that there are lots of different ways to help someone. Not everyone will respond in the same way so your approach needs to be flexible.

Share facts not judgements

Be aware to influence, not control – make sure your words don't sound like judgments or threats, provoking guilt. For instance, "You're blowing it, mate" or "Your family can't take any more of this" are attempts to coerce, not influence. All you can do is help them find their own motivation to access support. An attempt to rush it will cross the line into provoking resistance rather than exerting influence.

Come armed with a handful of the most persuasive facts you can find to help someone self-discover some actions, coping techniques and support.

Converge international

Converge International is your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider. To make an appointment or speak to a consultant:

1300 our eap
1300 687 327

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Invite dialogue

Talk openly about their thoughts and feelings, making sure they know they can talk with you about things which may be painful. Highlight their positive coping behaviours (i.e. talking to you) and talk through alternative ones (e.g. talking to EAP).

Be careful not to belittle their experience when normalising it – You are normalising the experience to make them feel that they can cope, not to make them feel even worse because they can't even cope with what normal people experience.

Help them find their own motivations for change

The only way to help a resistant person find motivation to change is to help them discover his or her own reasons for changing. You could open that possibility by ending this little monologue with a statement like, "Are things working out the way you'd like lately? If so, then I'm off base. If not, let's talk about what's going on, what you don't like, and what it might cost you in the future if it continues or escalates. We don't have to have that conversation now—but I'm here when you want to have it."

Encouraging action

After you have engaged in an open and honest conversation to discuss concerns, issues and motivations for change, help the other person make an action plan for the next few hours or days.

This could be to:

- Confide in a close friend, or family member.
- Speak to a GP or health professional, you could offer to go with them or make the appointment on their behalf.
- Make an appointment through the EAP service, you could offer to make the appointment on their behalf.

Support not rescue

Be available, but make sure they know your limits, including when you are available. Make sure that they are aware of how much time you have to help.

Don't forget about you

It can be challenging and draining to help someone – make sure you get support for yourself independent of the other person. EAP services may be a source of support for you as well as the person that you are supporting; at times it is easy to forget that you are not taking on responsibility for the person, but just checking in to see how they are doing.

Remember that it is not your responsibility to provide intensive support, you have done your bit just by approaching them – point them in the direction of help.

How you could suggest counselling

A sensitive way of broaching the topic of counselling is to ask the employee or colleague if they are receiving enough support to manage during this time. Mention to them you are happy to support however it can also be beneficial to seek professional, independent support and advice to cope with emotional concerns.

This is where the EAP service can assist.

1. Ensure you communicate the role of the EAP:
   a. It aims to assist employees manage personal/work related issues that might be just that little bit harder than they have previously encountered.
   b. It is completely confidential, is not intended as a disciplinary action, and its use will not be detrimental to the employee's career path.
   c. The EAP service is a voluntary process.
   d. Utilising an EAP service is normal and healthy. It is available to all employees within the organisation, and is a frequently used service within many organisations.
2. Suggest the employee contact the EAP service:
   a. Give the employee the EAP brochure and/or 1300 our EAP wallet card.
   b. Explain that a wide range of consultants are available.
   c. Indicate that the employee can phone Converge International to further discuss how the EAP service works.
   d. Emphasise the importance of keeping any scheduled appointments.
3. If you want to increase the likelihood of an employee accessing the service, and the need is clearly apparent, offer to:
   a. Telephone the EAP service with the employee's permission, to arrange either a face-to-face meeting, or for a consultant to call them directly at an arranged time.
   b. Accompany the employee to the initial appointment if you have significant concerns and they are agreeable to your doing so.
   c. Explain that business hours are 8 - 6pm Monday to Friday, however Converge International has experienced consultants on call 24 hours,7 days a week, 365 days per year for emergency support and this service is available to them via the 1300 number.

References:

Crucial Conversations, **http://www.crucialskills.com,** May 4, 2011 – reviewed