

How to Respond to People in Pain

by Adrian Pei

Four practical ideas for reaching out to people in challenging times.

Life can be messy and painful. Sooner or later, we all experience it—the breakup of a romantic relationship, a job loss or failure, the death of a family member or pet, struggles with fertility or adoption, the destructive choices of one’s child, and so on.

It’s in these moments that our leadership is put to the test. How do we respond? Sometimes we disengage or don’t respond to people in pain, because we don’t know what to do or say. **But great leaders see, acknowledge, and address painful realities of the people in their life.**

Think about someone in your life who is going through something painful right now. How can you let them know that you see them?

We can:

- **Send them an e-mail or text.**

“I just wanted you to know that I’m thinking about you, and want to be there for you during this time.” A short, simple message of support is better than silence.

- **Ask them what would help.**

Rather than assuming, simply ask them, “What would be helpful to you during this time?”

- **Listen to them.**

Don’t try to give advice, just give them space to share their thoughts and feelings. “That must be so hard. It makes sense why you would feel that way.” If you are afraid of

saying something insensitive, you can tell them that: “I don’t have the right words and I’m afraid to say the wrong thing, but I really want to be here for you.”

- **Follow up without pressure.**

“I wanted to check in with you again, and let you know I’m still here and thinking about you. Don’t feel pressure to respond, but if there is anything that would be helpful to you, I’m available to you.”

Any other ideas? **Remember, it’s in the painful experiences of life that our family and friends need us the most, even though they won’t always have the energy to pick up the phone.** If we don’t hear back from them, we can reach out again. They may appreciate it more than we can know.

Discussion or Reflection Questions:

1. When has someone been a great support to you when you needed it? What did they do or say that was helpful?
2. What have you learned about what is helpful (and not) when relating to people who are going through painful times?
3. Who is one person you know who might be going through challenges right now? Which of the ideas you’ve heard today could you try, while reaching out to them?