Strategies for Offering Quality Peer Support to Your Healthcare Colleagues
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Although many people have noticed an increase in stress levels and difficult emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers have been severely impacted due to the unique burden they bear in managing a pandemic with an overloaded healthcare system. One commonly cited survey of frontline healthcare workers during the initial outbreak in China revealed that 72% of nurses and physicians treating COVID-19 patients experienced psychological distress (Lai et al., 2020). It comes as no surprise, then, that years into the pandemic we are experiencing a crisis of burned-out healthcare workers. Estimates show that around one in five healthcare workers have quit since the pandemic began. While the general public can (and should) offer support to our healthcare workers, it is especially important that those working on the frontlines help support each other with the mental weight of this ongoing collective trauma. Let me be clear that peer support is only one evidence-based strategy that healthcare workers can use to help manage the significant mental burden of their experiences, and they are not expected to rely solely on peer support to cope with multiple years of adversity and trauma. However, research has demonstrated that strong colleague and supervisor support is protective against posttraumatic stress symptoms and other mental health concerns and can help reduce turnover intention among healthcare workers. Let’s explore some strategies for offering quality peer support:

Look for signs of distress:
If you notice that a coworker has an uncharacteristically short fuse lately, they might be experiencing a period of high stress. We can all be pressure cookers; agitation and irritability can build up inside without us realizing, and suddenly we’ve lashed out at a co-worker for no legitimate reason. Another warning sign might be the opposite – perhaps your coworker seems withdrawn and isolated from everyone. Other signs of a troubled colleague include:
- physical signs (e.g., untidy appearance, exhaustion)
- absenteeism (including repeated absences and excessive tardiness)
- reduced job performance
- worsened mood
- poor relationships with coworkers and supervisor
- unusual behavior (e.g., frequent tearfulness, outbursts).

Engage in regular check-ins:
This one requires digging a little deeper in our conversations with colleagues. If you have not heard from a work friend in a while or know a coworker is going through a particularly difficult time, be proactive and ask open-ended questions about how he/she is doing. A genuine “How are you doing?” can go a long way, but try to push beyond the simple, “Good! You?” You may have to start by speaking more openly about your own mental health challenges.

Express gratitude:
Thank your colleagues when they do something to help you out or make the day flow a bit easier. Gratitude is a win-win for healthcare workers; it makes your colleagues feel appreciated and noticed and helps you both feel more connected to your workplace community.
Create a culture where vulnerability is encouraged:
The first step to normalizing vulnerability is to realize that change starts with YOU! While it’s difficult to be vulnerable, your willingness to disclose opens the door for others to share. You can start the conversation by sharing your own feelings and life stressors. You can also normalize things like therapy appointments by using this example as a perfectly acceptable reason to utilize employee or student sick leave. This is especially important for those in leadership roles.

Mind your boundaries:
When offering peer support to a colleague, avoid the “fixer mentality” by remembering that you are not assuming the role of the provider in this case. Recognize when your coworker might need more than peer support and help direct them to the right provider and/or resource when indicated.

Avoid “venting” and practice sharing feelings instead:
Studies suggest that although venting (and even responding to venting) can make us feel good in the short term, it can ultimately make the user feel worse. Individuals who “vent” their anger and stress repeatedly are more likely to experience increased feelings of anger and express anger in maladaptive ways.

Listen without judgment:
Sometimes it is difficult to know what to say to someone who is struggling, but just having someone who listens without judgment is an extremely helpful form of peer support. Although it may seem like a good time to offer advice, try to avoid telling your colleague what they should be doing, since even helpful advice can feel judgmental when someone is in distress. And while sharing your own mental health experiences can make others feel less alone, this can backfire when someone is really struggling if the conversation is constantly redirected to your own experiences (i.e., try not to make it all about you).

Just say something:
Simply be with your colleague, say something, and let them know you care. If it is difficult to find the right words, here are a few phrases you could try out as you try to find the comment that feels most genuine and appropriate for the situation:
- “You are not alone.”
- “How have you been doing lately?”
- “I am here if you ever want to talk.”
- “What can I do to help? Would you like help problem-solving or do you just need someone to listen right now?”