

# Reducing Conflict 47 Other People's Pain

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Empathy is critical if we want to help other people who are experiencing pain. There ought to be a course somewhere in the education system on EMP-101. This article brings up some cautions about how we express our empathy when people are in crisis.

You will hear the phrase “I know how you feel” perhaps thousands of times in your lifetime. The truth is that other people can never fully feel your pain. They may be able to approximate it based on their own experiences. They may be able to deduce how you feel by extrapolating the situation and how you look or sound. They can never fully experience what you are going through.

Far better to say something like, “I am sorry you are going through this. Is there any way I can help?” You cannot put yourself fully in the other person's shoes. Why utter banal phrases that make it seem like you can?

I will direct this article mostly to a term called “Professional Hurt.” I learned the term from Dr. Ruby Brown from Jamaica, who coined the phrase. I met Ruby while speaking at the Caribbean Leadership Program in Trinidad. She wrote her dissertation on the topic of Professional Hurt. It is when a person in a professional setting is abused somehow by managers or circumstances beyond control.

Professional Hurt also occurs when a person gets demoted or fired. It may be the result of being passed over for a promotion or being marginalized in some way.

When someone else is hurting, spend more time listening to the person. Avoid the temptation to say, “Oh that is just like how I felt last year when they withheld a promised raise.” That is not going to make the other person feel any better. Listening to stories of people who are worse off or have had the same problem does not relieve the person's pain today. Rather, ask thoughtful questions if the person wants to talk. Just be present if the person is in shock or unable to verbalize the pain.

Body language is particularly important when dealing with another person who is in a crisis. You can show that you care more with your facial expression than you can with a constant stream of babble. Just listening and nodding may be the best thing you can do for the other person at that moment.

Logic is not a good approach. You may be tempted to cheer the person up by saying, “These things don’t last forever; you’ll be feeling better soon.” That kind of approach often backfires. It can belittle the person who is suffering to imply that time alone will heal things.

Try to avoid hackneyed expressions that are commonly used in the working world. If your friend has just been fired, don’t tell him, “Whenever one door is closed, another will open.” Do not try to cheer him up with, “Nobody likes working for that jerk anyway.” Shut your trap and take your cues from the person who is hurting.

Let your presence and body language do the talking for you. If it seems the other person needs input, try “you’re strong enough to overcome this.” Another phrase is “what would you like to happen now,” but the laconic approach is usually superior.

Do not recount how your neighbor had the same situation and ended up with a big promotion. All those kinds of phrases may make you feel like you are helping. In reality little real comfort is coming through the overused phrases or comparisons.

Above all, recognize that you do not know how the other person is feeling and the best thing you can do is admit that. Show your love and feeling by avoiding the typical mistakes made by well-intended people.

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