

Providing Support to Colleagues

It is common to experience a range of reactions and emotions when you learn a fellow colleague may have reduced FTE, or need to leave or change jobs due to budget decisions. Your reactions and feelings may include:

- Relief that you were not similarly affected.
- Frustration or anger this change may increase your workload.
- Guilt about feeling relief or anger while others are facing difficult job impacts/choices.
- Resentment or anger, in general or toward management, especially if you feel the colleague hasn't been treated fairly.
- You may resent an employee who fills a different job to avoid being "at-risk."
- Insecurity ("Am I next?") and personal worry may arise.
- Grief feelings can develop, especially if you are close to someone who experiences loss of income or has to leave their current job. Your feelings may be similar to those experienced with a divorce or death.
- Awkwardness around the affected person may lead to some people starting to avoid them which can cause hurt feelings or misunderstandings.

Some of those affected may openly talk about what is going on and their related feelings. Others may say very little. Discomfort may cause you to change how you relate to them. Fear of saying the wrong thing, or not knowing what to say, may result in you saying nothing. You may be tempted to reduce contact or walk a different route back to your desk to avoid them. Your discomfort or desire to "fix it" or protect the person may lead you to say something to them or others you wish you had not said.

Isolation and feeling avoided is a common experience of employees who lose FTE or their jobs. This can compound their sense of grief and loss, which is the last thing that is intended.

Here are some ideas how you might be sensitive and helpful to a colleague:

- Continue your normal greetings and interactions.
- If you are friends, you could acknowledge their situation and ask if they want to talk about it at break or lunch. If they say "no," respect their need to set a boundary and offer to be available in the future if they change their mind.
- If they want to talk, don't dominate the conversation. Avoid phrases such as, "Maybe it's for the best," or "It's not personal." Be comfortable with periods of silence as they are expressing feelings. Let them process. Do not offer advice unless asked. Listen.
- If a colleague is directing their anger or irritability at you, let them know you empathize, and you can ask them to stop. If you need assistance in dealing with the problem you can consult with Employee Assistance and/or seek intervention by an appropriate supervisor.
- Staying connected with the affected colleague, by periodically offering understanding and support, is one of the most important things you can do. Just being there to listen is very helpful and supportive. Remember that you don't have to have answers or fix it.
- Remind colleagues of the services available from the **Employee Assistance Office** www.wisc.edu/eao (608) 263-2987. You can confidentially consult with them, especially if you have concerns about someone's wellbeing or the colleague seems depressed or extremely angry.