I was recently stressed out and sleepless because I had to tell a difficult senior colleague something he was not going to want to hear — and I always dreaded his angry, high-volume pushback when it was directed at me. An acquaintance listened to me, nodded quietly, and said, “People have yelled at me for far less.” His manner and his words shifted my perspective by normalizing the conversation that lay ahead. Instead of seeing the upcoming difficult conversation as a black hole sucking in all my wellbeing — which is how stress made it appear to me — I realized that these things happen, that yes, they are unpleasant, but the world continues to turn.

I have never known a stressed-out person who was helped by the suggestion: “You shouldn’t stress out.” Helping someone think differently about a stressful situation is likely to work better. In truth, some help is simply more helpful than other help. If you want to support a stressed-out colleague, it can be helpful to know what not to say. Here are some things to avoid:
No clichés, no platitudes. Platitudes and clichés don’t inspire stressed-out people; they depress them, because they sound empty. The stressed-out are not necessarily unmotivated or lazy. So, don’t say things like “When the going gets tough, the tough get going,” or “Just do it.”

No one-upmanship. If your intention is to help, a lot of “I” talk — taking up the air-time with, well, yourself — in such a way that makes a colleague and her concerns feel inconsequential won’t do it. Hold the story about how you bombed at the convention for another time. And never say things like: “You think you have it bad? I…”

No minimizing. Dismissal is the refuge of the uncomfortable. It doesn’t help someone else, but it does make us look small. It’s simply not helpful to say things like “Don’t worry about it,” “That’s nothing,” “You’re exaggerating this,” or “Get over it.”

No moralizing. Getting up on your high horse isn’t helpful. The problem is not just that it doesn’t help, but that it doesn’t help and you’re being annoying. Resist the urge to say things like, “Well, if you had managed your time better…”

No lengthy commiseration. A short wallow with your stressed-out co-worker lets him vent. But commiseration is not the same as help, because while the two of you are sitting together cursing his fate, there’s no forward motion toward something more useful.

Stress affects us mentally, physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Dealing with all of that is a tall order, so don’t take it all on. Pick something manageable, and help a stressed-out colleague to the degree you choose. Remember that you’re not curing someone’s stress; you are working to lessen it in the moment. Here’s a few things to try:

Ask “What would help?” If the reply is “nothing” or “I don’t know,” sit quietly and stay silent for 15 seconds (the length of time it takes to sing
“Happy Birthday” in your head). Some people are embarrassed to be stressed out. Others feel their mind racing, or it has gone blank. The quiet, steady moment you give them lets them breathe, feel your calm attention, and think about what, in fact, might help.

Say “You can handle this. I’ve seen you come up with an offer that breaks a stalemate [or] navigate a tricky negotiation [or] re-work the numbers on the spot in a tough situation before.” You are giving your co-worker a vision of herself that is true, and more functional, than the one she is caught up in now. You help her recall her abilities at a time when stress makes her self-deprecating.

Offer to climb up and down eight flights of stairs, or walk halfway across the parking lot with your co-worker, if alleviating stress by physical activity is your choice. Pick something simple and immediate.

Introduce a paradox – a contradiction. Psychologically, stress creates tunnel vision. People get locked into negative thoughts and see nothing else. Arguing that your stressed-out friend is wrong doesn’t have a good track record for helpfulness, but opening a second view of her situation, side by side with her negative view, does.

Try this: Acknowledge her first view, since anxiety is her reality at the moment, and introduce the second view: she feels the way she feels and she can close this sale. She’s stressed out and she can say no to the client. The two seem incompatible, but that’s the tunnel vision talking. In practice, real people manage to do both simultaneously all the time. Actors famously worry when they are not nervous before their scenes because their performance flattens when they are too comfortable. David Mamet, the award-winning playwright, advised actors that “you do not have to feel like performing your action...you learn to act in spite of your feeling.”

For too many of us, feeling stressed-out becomes a familiar groove. When you have to give a presentation, for instance, you expect to stress out over it, even though talking to other people is what you do all day long. But you can change grooves. The same good approaches you use to help co-workers manage their stress can help you manage your own, too. Like a good athlete, you can
focus on handling yourself well in a difficult situation, rather than fixate on how you feel. This is a model of attitude following behavior. When you change your relationship to stress, by viewing stress management as a skill and a habit, its grip on you weakens and you suffer less.

The next time you find yourself stressing out, worrying that you will fail, rethink your perspective on failure itself. Take a page from Samuel Beckett: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”


This article is about STRESS

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CHRISTOPHER ALTIZER  3 hours ago

Love this! For most of us, the opportunity to effectively engage colleagues is as or more frequent than bosses or subordinates. Including the list of "do's" with "do not's" is great balance. The affirmation of "you got this" is powerful and linking it to "how can I help" can create a coaching moment if they feel they actually don't have it. The stress-reducing benefits of a walk are well-documented and can provide the affirmation or coaching moments needed. Two
other favorites of mine: "Let's take a breathe there," and actually face my colleague and we take 3 full breaths together - further reducing the stress response. "Let's stretch on it," and pull our shoulders back and down and roll them - reducing the tension that has built in the upper body.

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