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Supporting a Colleague in Crisis: Would You Know How to Help?

It can happen in any work environment: a colleague starts behaving in a way that causes you concern. What are some of the signs that indicate a real problem? How far should you go in offering help, and what kind of support is most effective?

Michael D. Groat, Ph.D., is Director of the Professionals in Crisis (PIC) Program at The Menninger Clinic. The program serves men and women in high-performance fields who are experiencing difficulty managing their career and relationships because of psychiatric disorder, addiction, demands and stressors. Dr. Groat, an assistant professor in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Baylor College of Medicine, fielded questions about supporting a colleague in crisis.

Q: *What are some specific behavior changes that may indicate that a colleague is stressed, impaired or engaging in unhealthy activities?*

A: All of us face stress in our lives, and there is a wide range in the way people handle stress. People who work together can usually see when someone is losing their balance and perspective, even if the cause is unknown.



People under extreme stress are more likely to be disorganized and forgetful. Losing things, missing appointments and being chronically late can all be symptoms of someone living with stress. Irritability and abruptness can be signs of stress, too. If someone who is normally pleasant becomes cranky and irritable, complains of an excessive work load, or just doesn't seem to be themselves, that may be a signal that there is a problem.

Withdrawal is another type of behavior that may indicate someone is having a difficult time. It can include frequent or unexplained absences, being overly absorbed in work, and avoiding social contact ("locked door syndrome"). A stressed person may appear to be glum or preoccupied.

Drinking or other forms of substance abuse can be responses to stress. A physician may start having a few drinks as a way to relax, and then a few drinks becomes excessive drinking. The problem may only become obvious if they

happen to be on call, and they either sound impaired over the phone or show up with the smell of alcohol on their breath. Substance abuse might show up as coming in late looking tired, or sudden absenteeism.

The tipoff is when there is a change in typical behavior that's hard to understand.

Q: *What barriers keep high-achieving professionals from seeking help?*

A: What I hear from physicians regularly is that they have very high expectations of themselves. They are expected to be in charge, to have all the solutions, and they are even expected to do miracles at times. The sense of invulnerability makes it very hard for them to admit that they are having trouble. They often think, "I'm the healer, not the one in need of help. Other people have trouble and are in need, not me."

High achievers often feel a need to conceal any sign of trouble or weakness. Perfectionism and the distorted view that any difficulty connotes failure can keep individuals from recognizing a problem as a challenge to be addressed, and not as something one is

For high-achieving professionals, the greatest barrier to seeking treatment is a sense of invulnerability.



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defined by. If the problem is related to a mental health issue, there is still stigma around mental illness. Many high achievers find it shameful to acknowledge imperfection, need or vulnerability.

Q. *Are there certain “triggers” that are common in a medical school environment?*

A. Yes, there is unique pressure. Lives are on the line in the hospital environment, and faculty have the pressures of publication and research requirements in addition to clinical work.

There are worries about tenure, faculty reviews and expectations of mentorship. There is pressure to be a good role model for students and residents. A lot of people have their eyes on you. If someone is having a tough time because of stress, anxiety or other difficulty, it can be physically

draining. I’ve heard physicians say “keeping up the façade is a lot of work.”

Q: *If a colleague has confided that they are having problems, what is the most effective way to offer support?*

A: Listen without being judgmental. Empathize. Say “I appreciate you telling me this, how can I be of support?” Do not say “just get over it.” That is never helpful.

Just the fact they are confiding in you is a big deal, because openness can help relieve someone’s sense of aloneness. Honor and respect that. If you have a personal story about how you dealt with a similar problem, it’s okay to share it. That can go a long way in making someone feel comfortable about reaching out. It may also help them recognize they can’t do it alone.

Let them know you will keep what they tell you in

confidence. Don’t offer unsolicited advice. It’s okay to ask, “have you been looking into getting some help?”

It is often the interventions of others that get physicians into treatment. By the time we see them in our program, they may have been given no choice but to get help.

Q: *What is some of the most current thought on how professionals in crisis can be successfully treated?*

A: In many cases, individuals come in with a long history. We try to help them understand the context out of which their crisis emerged. After getting a clearer view of the big picture, and addressing the core issues that contributed to the crisis, treatment proceeds to work on a practical level. We help them develop strategies to cope with stress, and strategies to develop a lifestyle of wellness.

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How Much Technology is Too Much?

It’s time to step away from the computer, turn off the cell phone and have a face-to-face, human conversation if you have any of the following warning signs, say experts at The Menninger Clinic.

1. You need your connection—now! You panic or become irritable when you can’t get cell phone service, your Internet connection is down or your cable or satellite feed is not working.

2. You lose track of time. You may have a problem if you consistently get lost in the Internet world, intending to

spend an hour, and looking up, you discover it has been four hours.

3. You lose track of family and friends. You spend less and less time participating in personal activities or limit your time with friends and family to attend to your email or return phone calls. You frequently miss appointments or are late because you got caught up on the Internet, checking e-mail or talking on your cell phone.

4. Your life revolves around technology and not actual relationships. When

you start or end your day on the Internet checking e-mails or chatting, that’s a sign that technology is taking over your life.

5. You can’t leave home without it. You can’t take a vacation without bringing four different charging devices for all your gadgets and gizmos. Your car needs extra batteries to power all of your devices. When your cell phone ear piece becomes a permanent part of your wardrobe, that’s a problem.

List courtesy of The Menninger Clinic, 2009