

# EmployeeCare News



Ron Wean

## The Return of the Wounded Co-Worker

By Ron Wean, Counselor

"I don't know what to say," said a co-worker who worried about the return of a coworker. "What a family tragedy!"

"It must be hard to try to find what normal is after going through that," said another.

"Well, maybe we should just pretend it didn't happen," said yet another. "After all, you don't want to bring up an ugly part of the trauma."

"But if I just went through a terrible time," challenged another co-worker, "I would be thinking about it all the time. There must be something we can do to help, but what?"

This conversation is played often in workplaces everywhere. When a co-worker experiences a trauma, tragedy, or significant loss, the other co-workers are left wondering, "What shall we do when they return? How can we be helpful and not hurtful? Are there things to avoid doing or saying? How should we treat our wounded co-worker?"

### Planning The Return

It may be helpful to plan for the co-worker's return by contacting the co-worker before they come back to work. Within that conversation, a supervisor or a closely aligned colleague may wish to assure the returning wounded that all staff wants to be sensitive to their needs and supportive in the transition of returning to work. When asked, the returning wounded may be able to identify needs and concerns, and a plan of action developed.

However, some may still feel overwhelmed by the tragedy and unable to identify what is needed in order to return to work. In that case, it may be helpful to approach with an offer to help: "I know you will be coming back to work soon. I have some ideas about what might be helpful to you, but only when you are ready to discuss them. May I call you back in a couple of days to check out



these ideas?” Demonstrating respect for their time, space, feelings, and need for some control in their lives after experiencing the powerlessness of trauma may give needed calming assurance.

### Prepare the Staff

If you are a supervisor, call a staff meeting to address the anxiety about the return of the wounded co-worker. People need a safe forum to express themselves, share their feelings, and receive accurate information. The following items may be helpful for staff to know:

- Do not ignore the person, or, ask more questions about “the details.” If your objective is to help the co-worker, then make offers to help them now. Asking an open-ended question like, “Is there anything you need me to do today? I want to help,” are kind offers of both help and support. It is a reminder that “we are here for you.”
- The loss, trauma or tragedy should not be overly emphasized or minimized. To “awfulize” it, that is, to say, “That’s the most terrible thing I have ever heard in my entire life,” is not helpful, because it just increases anxiety. However, saying platitudes like, “time heals all wounds,” or, “it will get better” are equally unhelpful, because it dismisses the pain. It may be more helpful to just notice what they are doing. For example, “I noticed you were eating alone. Would you like some company?” is respectful of space, attentive and supportive, and gives some feeling of control back to the wounded.
- Don’t try to make a quick and easy connection to their pain. Saying things like, “I know how you feel,” or, “My cousin Vinny went through the same thing!” is not helpful. Instead, invite the connection through open-ended statements like, “It must be hard for you,” or, “You are brave to be here,” or, “Your life must be more difficult.” These statements acknowledge the pain, respect the uniqueness of the person’s pain, but also acknowledge your willingness to listen and connect with them.

- Unless you have permission, do not talk to the media disclosing information you have heard or impressions of the returning co-worker. This may not only have a negative effect on the co-worker, but it also could be a breach of confidentiality.
- If there is protracted legal involvement, a new legal procedure, and new media revelations involving the tragedy, the wounded co-worker may need continued understanding and support. Each new revelation brings on more stress, which is cumulative. Continue to approach the co-worker with open-ended concerns, verbalizing what you notice about them right now. Follow this with offers of your presence, acknowledgement of their pain and your willingness just to listen.
- You may also wish to encourage them to use the employee assistance program as another safe, confidential resource within a professional context.

People can and do make it through trauma, tragedy, and loss. Most of the time, they come back to work. However, the process of discovering “the new normal” is a lifelong experience. This process is difficult, time consuming, and takes up much energy and effort. Co-workers can be a significant part of this journey toward finding some peace with a new way of living.

*If you are having concerns about how to relate to a returning co-worker, or, you feel the journey back to work has been harder than expected, call EmployeeCare for a free, confidential appointment at (937) 208-6626.*



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# Mindfulness and the Modern Workplace

By Amita Pujara, Counseling Intern

In the busy workplace, there are many stressors now that we did not have to deal with in the past. You can no longer count on having the same job your whole career and your colleagues are not a part of your extended family. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Americans typically have seven careers in their lifetime. Changes in jobs and careers are stressful. How can we prepare ourselves for the many adjustments we will have to make in our lifetime? Mindfulness can help.

Stressed brains function differently than normal brains. Stressed brains can let irrational thoughts torment them endlessly. Changing thinking patterns can help alleviate negative thought patterns. Mindfulness can help create new neural pathways and change thinking patterns. This helps reduce stress and the stress hormones that flow through our bodies and cause health problems. Mindfulness can be used as a coping mechanism in stressful situations.

We can learn to practice mindfulness at work and at home. It is a skill to focus on what is happening moment to moment. We can begin to deal with many of the causes of everyday stress such as anxiety provoking thoughts about the past or future and any other stressful phenomena. Mindfulness can be achieved through a meditation practice where we train ourselves to be aware of present moment events such as our breath, body sensations, or external events such as sounds.

## Using mindfulness to reduce stress at work can be done using the following steps:

- Take a deep breath and hold it, slowly count to 4 and exhale slowly, count to 4 again, repeat this 4 times.
- Focus on what you are thinking about right now and bring yourself out into the physical world. Notice if you are feeling tension or tightness anywhere in your body.
- Try to look at issues from a different perspective. Ask yourself, "Is this a problem or an inconvenience?"



- Watch for judgments. We are constantly comparing ourselves to others. Ask yourself, "Am I being too hard on myself? Am I doing the best I can?"
- Take some time to think about what is most important in your life. Make sure you are working on tasks that are part of that goal. Eliminate tasks that do not enrich your life.
- Give yourself positive messages like, "I am doing the best I can", "I love and accept myself the way I am", "It is safe to be human, it is ok to make mistakes", "Progress not perfection".

Being mindful at work can help with mental calmness, composure, evenness of temper, ability to avoid extreme emotions, realizing when irrational thoughts are beginning, and existing in a world with an open and non-judgmental attitude.

Many people live life on automatic pilot. Have you ever arrived somewhere without knowing how you got there, eaten a whole meal without tasting a bite, or listened to a story without remembering a single detail? Mindlessness has become the new norm in society. We live our lives without actually being mentally present. Becoming mindful can help improve your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

Most people only notice physical sensations in their body at any given moment, such as when we have a headache or are experiencing something pleasurable. People who practice martial arts, yoga and dance are in tune to what their bodies are telling

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them. Most of us have learned to ignore conscious signals our body sends us at any given moment. How many of us eat when we are no longer hungry, stay up when our bodies are telling us to rest, or ignore other signals our bodies are giving us until symptoms become severe?

Dr. Richard Sears, psychologist, corporate coach, and founder of the Center for Clinical Mindfulness and Meditation at the Union Institute & University in Cincinnati, defines mindfulness as a calm awareness of one's body functions, feelings, content of consciousness, or consciousness itself. It is a subtle

process you are using this very moment. The fact that this process lives above and beyond words does not make it unreal, quite the opposite. Mindfulness is the reality which gives rise to words and the words that follow are simply pale shadows of reality. Mindfulness is awareness without judgment of life as it is, yourself as you are, other people as they are, in the here and now, via direct and immediate experience.

## EmployeeCare

Keeping you informed from EmployeeCare, your employee assistance program, a benefit extended by your organization to all employees and their household members. Some exceptions related to the terms of each individual company contract may apply.

**Located:** 409 E. Monument St.  
Suite 201  
Dayton, Ohio 45402

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