

If You're Not Sure What To Say To A Colleague Going Through A Health Challenge, Consider These 5 Phrases

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After more than two years into the global Covid-19 pandemic, many professionals are encountering workplace colleagues or clients struggling with a serious health challenge either personally or within their family.

Unfortunately, many are intimidated or fearful of saying the wrong thing so they make the classic mistake of saying nothing. With more than 2.5 billion visits since 1997, CaringBridge has provided an online platform for people to share information and receive support during difficult health journeys. Here are some recommended phrases based on [their suggestions](#).

1. How are you feeling?

While it may seem obvious to ask this of someone known to be going through a health challenge, some may be overly hesitant. For someone sick with Covid-19 for example, CaringBridge recommends checking in by asking how they're feeling. "Check in with them regularly to see how their health is, and how they're dealing with the symptoms," the site recommends. "If you have also gone through Covid-19, you might share something that helped you feel better, whether it's a type of tea or a funny series to binge watch."

It's also important to remember that Covid-19 and other health challenges can often impact one's mental and emotional health as much as one's physical health, and oftentimes symptoms that are not as visible can be just as taxing. "Physical symptoms are just one negative effect of the virus," CaringBridge reminds. "The feelings of anxiety, loneliness and even shame can make it even more difficult to cope. Don't be afraid to ask how their mental health is doing and offer a listening ear should they need it."

2. Let me help you with...

While it's certainly appropriate, even advisable, to ask how you can help, those questions can sometimes be received as rhetorical or obligatory. The alternative approach of simply stating, "Let me help you with..." may reinforce more authentic intention. "This is one of the most helpful things you can say," the site insists. "Instead of asking your loved one how you can help, *tell* them specifically what you're able to help with." Particularly when there's a close relationship, it can make a real difference when others step in to not just express general concern but also take the next step to find a practical way to lighten their load.

For colleagues who might be overwhelmed by a new diagnosis or serious health challenge in their family, CaringBridge recommends using a tool like [the CaringBridge Planner](#), an all-inclusive scheduling tool to help a friend or colleague request and receive support with everyday tasks like meal prep, getting groceries, picking up medications, etc. This can be particularly helpful if someone is quarantined or otherwise unable to manage normal, daily activities for themselves or their family. While online shopping and delivery services are great, it's also important to remember that with acute conditions or even nagging longer term symptoms like fatigue and stress, online ordering can sometimes feel daunting.

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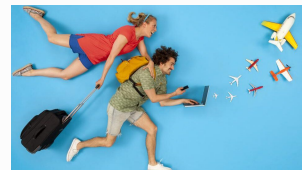
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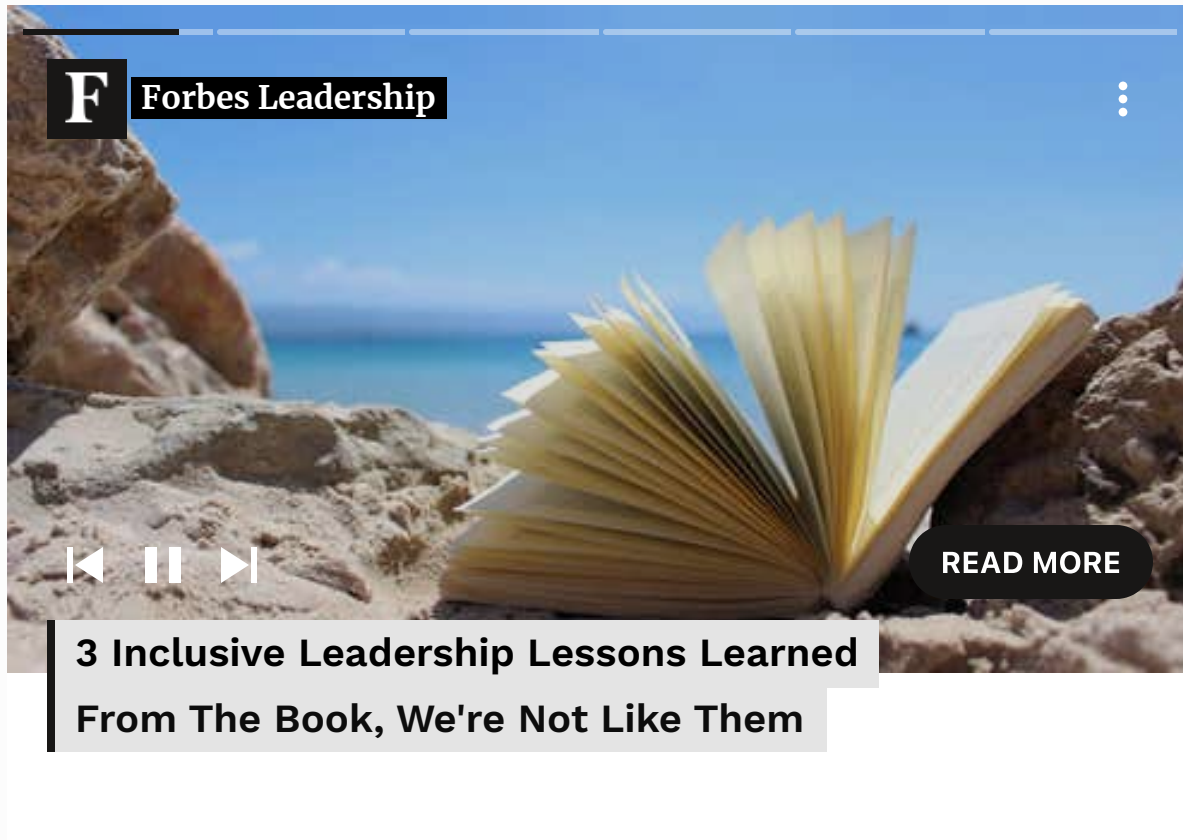


For those colleagues playing double duty as caregivers, it's important to acknowledge that they need support too. CaringBridge user Christy Becker offers the following advice based on her own health journey. "If you're a caregiver, take care of yourself the best you can. Make sure you eat, make sure you sleep, make sure you journal. You have to take time for yourself, and you have to walk away from things when you can." Offering simple acts of support like taking on a nagging mundane task or running an errand on their behalf doesn't just give them some much needed time but also clearly signals your authentic support.

3. "Did you see the latest episode?"

While it's important to not be afraid to center their health challenge during discussion, one should also be careful to not reduce them to a diagnosis or health condition. It's important to remember that they're still

a person—who watches Survivor, plays Wordle religiously or enjoys flea markets—so don't forget to talk to them about other areas of their life as well.



For example, if you have a colleague who might have Cancer, it's important to avoid only focusing on that challenge. “[Cancer patients](#) spend plenty of time discussing treatment, symptoms and prognosis,” explains CaringBridge. “Your loved one will appreciate those who can find something brighter to talk about. Whatever the topic, getting their mind off their illness will be refreshing.”

4. What day works for a visit?

This phrase is another great way to move beyond more vague offers that can feel performative or obligatory and instead show that you're seriously interested in providing support...real support. CaringBridge reminds us how important it is to visit with those who are battling a health challenge (when it's safe). “Humans are social creatures. We thrive off personal interactions, especially with those who we feel comfortable around. During this difficult time, it's crucial to show your support by planning regular visits. This will give your friend or family member a sense of community

and help them feel like things are more normal,” the site explains. Visits can also provide much-needed breaks for caregivers so remember them as well.

5. This stinks

Sometimes the best way to support someone dealing with a difficult health situation is to simply acknowledge the obvious—disease and illness are hard, and there’s no sugar coating that. Instead of pretending “everything will be fine” or trotting out tired, trite sayings like “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” or “everything happens for a reason” that can invalidate the real anguish someone may be feeling during one of the lowest points in their life, it can be helpful to just sit with their reality in an authentic way. “Cancer stinks. Sometimes, validating that for someone who has to go through it every day is all that needs to be said in the moment,” CaringBridge insists.

Perhaps more than ever, professionals are interacting with colleagues who are managing difficult health challenges, and it’s important to be able to communicate with them in a way that is authentic and empathetic. Remember, that no one is perfect, everyone is unique and there’s no perfect thing to say. Ultimately, what’s most important is letting them know that you care through words and deeds, and never forget that the most important communication element may be the ability to listen.

For CaringBridge’s suggestions on what you can do to support a colleague or loved one facing a difficult health journey, consider [these recommendations](#).

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