

How to Support a Co-Worker

If a member of your crew is returning to the job after time off to get help, you and others may be struggling with mixed feelings and questions. What should I say or not say? Is this person really ready to be back at work? How can I help? Regardless of the circumstances, people know the importance of being there when a fellow worker is in need. Here are some steps you can take:

Above all, follow their lead. Whether in recovery from addiction, a major loss, mental or physical illness, no two individuals respond the same. Depending on an individual's stage of recovery and comfort level, the member may or may not want to acknowledge their struggles to other peers at work. This must be respected. Forcing someone to discuss their health or why they have been off the job could negatively impact the individual and the entire crew.

Convey a supportive welcome back. While directly inquiring about a co-worker's health or treatment experience can be intrusive, no one is asking you to ignore the elephant in the room. Offering neutral supportive statements to a member transitioning back to work can help minimize mutual feelings of awkwardness, while conveying a sense of trust and support. Simple statements such as "We're glad to have you back," "It hasn't been the same around here without you," or "I'm here if you need anything" can go a long way.

Avoid comparisons or claiming that you understand.

Occasionally, well intentioned attempts to empathize with someone's experience can have the opposite effect of minimizing their pain. You cannot truly understand what someone is going through, unless you personally have walked in their shoes. Refrain from statements such as, "I had a friend that went through the same thing." It's okay to acknowledge you actually don't understand, but you do still care.

Small talk is good talk. Don't be afraid to engage the returning worker in discussion about recent events in your workplace or community. Conversations such as these can help normalize the individual's experience back at work by shifting focus from the individual to the daily operations of the job. Such conversations help convey the message, "You are still one of us." Cultivating a sense of comradery is essential to support the member's reintegration back to the job and your crew.

Look out for one another. The hardest part of recovery begins after the individual is discharged from treatment. For some, relapse or resurgence of symptoms is a part of the recovery process. If you see changes in mood or behavior that could suggest a member is struggling to readjust at home or on the job, it's a good idea to gently approach the member first and simply ask "How are you doing with everything?".