

# Navigating a Delicate Subject: The Layoff of a Friend

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Published: April 24, 2009

A FEW months ago, I was having lunch with a friend who had just heard that her husband had lost his banking job. I commiserated and when the bill came, I reached to pay it — but then hesitated, because I didn't want her to feel like a charity case. We ended up splitting the check.

Unfortunately, it was not the last time I faced the dilemma of how to react appropriately when hearing of a friend's job loss. While much has been written on coping with being laid off, there is far less on what to say and do when someone close to you is suddenly unemployed.

"It's a lot like death — people don't know what to say," said Penelope Trunk, chief executive officer of Brazen Careerist, a social networking site for young professionals. "Everyone wants to be nice, but 50 percent will try to say something nice and won't."

Most of my unemployed friends — sadly, a growing number — were glad to share the helpful (and stupid) comments that they have received, but hesitated to be identified for fear of offending well-meaning but clumsy friends.

So in general terms, here is what they told me:

First, hold off on the platitudes. Hours after someone has lost a job is not the time to start offering upbeat suggestions. A friend of mine, who asked not to be identified, said that she received an e-mail message right after her job loss telling her, "This could be a huge opportunity!"

"You need time to mourn," my friend said. Most people, after they've been handed a pink slip and box to pack up their desk, don't feel like celebrating. As much as you want to cheer up a friend, respect the need to just feel lousy for a while.

Steven Pofcher, who posted a comment in response to a blog post by Ms. Trunk, expanded on that thought.

"When someone is laid off, DO NOT ever say: 'You know that things happen for a reason,' or 'When one door closes, another opens.' "

The definition of platitude, after all is "a pointless, unoriginal or empty comment or statement made as though it were significant or helpful." Keep that in mind.

On the other hand, nobody likes to appear pathetic.

“One thing that drives me up the wall is the pitying look,” said an acquaintance, Carol, who was laid off from her job as a recruiter at the executive search firm Korn/Ferry International.

The best thing you can do is not make any assumptions, said Nancy Collamer, founder of the Web site [layoffsurvivalguide.com](http://layoffsurvivalguide.com).

“Sometimes people are relieved or even happy,” she said. “Don’t say, ‘I’m so sorry.’ Start by saying as neutrally as possible, ‘I heard the news.’ Then really listen to their response and say, ‘Can I help?’ ”

Sometimes it helps to offer specific assistance, like “I can review your résumé,” or “Let me introduce you to so-and-so at X company,” Ms. Collamer said. But if you sense people don’t really want your help right then, back off.

Also, Ms. Trunk warned, don’t offer to recommend someone if you really don’t think that person can do the job. If your friend or colleague takes you up on your offer, you’ll end up in an awkward position.

Don’t exclaim, “Oh my God, what are you going to do?” (This may seem obvious, but people say it does happen.) And, Ms. Collamer said, don’t ask, “Did you know this was going to happen?” or “Did you see this coming?”

“A lot of people are hypersensitive and feel they should have read the warnings,” Ms. Collamer said.

Avoid advice like, “Have you looked online?” (If they haven’t, they’ve got bigger problems than a job loss.) or “In this economy, finding a job could take awhile.” (Thanks for the insight.)

“Be careful of telling people how they should feel or what they should do,” Ms. Collamer said.

I find it particularly tricky in the weeks after the layoff to know how much I should check in and inquire about how the job hunt is going. After all, if you ask too much it can be annoying, if you don’t ask you could appear insensitive.

Louise, a senior executive at an advertising firm who was recently laid off — and asked that her middle name be used — said that she found it extremely tiresome to have to keep updating friends on her latest job-searching activities.

“It’s like someone trying to get pregnant and having a difficult time,” she said. “You don’t say every time you talk to them, ‘Are you pregnant yet?’ You know when it happens you’ll hear.”

Louise said friends who didn't realize how long it might take her to get a senior position at a company made her feel as if she were a failure when they were surprised that nothing had turned up yet.

"I actually had friends say, 'What's wrong, why is it taking this long?' " she said. "I know it's all out of love. But it gets to be too much."

So Louise suggests doing what she did — laying down some rules and explaining that she'll update friends when something happens, but until then, she'd rather talk about other things.

"You need to set expectations of what you want to talk about and how much," she said. And if you're a friend who isn't sure whether to bring up the topic, Louise said, "You should just ask: 'How do you want to handle this? Do you want me to ask every time because I care, or would you rather I didn't?' Hopefully you'll get an honest answer."

Those are some of the don'ts. So what are the dos? Here are some suggestions:

If you want to do something concrete right away, inviting your unemployed friend over for a home-cooked dinner is a great idea. But don't be offended if he doesn't feel like socializing right away. Offer a rain check.

In the few days after her layoff, a friend said she was particularly touched when a friend e-mailed, "When can I take you out to lunch?"

"It wasn't a vague, 'Let's do lunch,' " she said. "It was specific."

Carol said she found it helpful when some friends offered to open up their network and share contacts through the social networking site LinkedIn.

Remember that your friends have a life outside their jobs, so ask about extracurricular stuff — hobbies, volunteer work, children.

If you're still employed at the place where a colleague has been laid off, ask her if she wants to be filled in on the latest work happenings. People usually enjoy being kept in the loop, and often feel hurt when former co-workers just drop out of sight.

Finally, since losing health care benefits is such a scary prospect when you're unemployed, sharing useful information about health insurance can help.

And here is a thought for the newly laid off. The vast majority of us want to say the right thing; it just might come out wrong. If that's the case, cut your friends some slack. As Ms. Trunk says, "Most people's moronic comments are rooted in kindness."

