

Listening Skills

Learn how to respond to employees who have experienced a trauma.

Interview by Kathryn Tyler

At some time or another, every employee goes through an emotionally distressing experience. HR professionals can play a key role in helping employees through a trauma by listening attentively without judgment.

In 20 years of researching trauma, Jennifer Freyd, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon and co-author of the book *Blind to Betrayal: Why We Fool Ourselves We Aren't Being Fooled* (Wiley, 2013), has found that trauma resulting from betrayal, such as abuse by someone trusted, is particularly toxic to individuals.

Betrayal is not limited to personal relationships. Trauma can also result from institutional betrayal, such as when an employer ignores or minimizes bad things that have happened.

Freyd teaches individuals how to react to traumatic news in a way that fosters healing for those who have been betrayed.

Why is the response to shocking or traumatic news important?

The response can help or hurt. The stakes are high for the person doing the telling. This is particularly true for people who describe being harmed by another person, especially in the case of rape or sexual assault. These events are not only upsetting but also stigmatizing. A blaming or invalidating response can cause a person to suffer greatly—in some cases, it can constitute an even greater betrayal than the initial event.

In contrast, a good response can help people heal. People need to feel believed and respected in

order to heal and maintain self-esteem and personal integrity.

When hearing traumatic news, can HR professionals respond by just doing what comes naturally at the time?

That depends on their emotional knowledge. It might also hinge on their own trauma history. If they experienced trauma that they haven't worked out for themselves, they may close others down. Some people get anxious and try to change the topic when they hear an individual talk about an upsetting or stigmatizing situation. Others blame the person who has been traumatized or say they don't believe him. People may do that to protect themselves but in the process hurt others.

What should HR professionals do when hearing traumatic news?

Listen respectfully and allow silence; keep eye contact and sit upright or lean

forward when listening. Stay calm and supportive. Give advice only when asked.

Say validating things such as, "If that happened to me, I can imagine I'd feel really overwhelmed, too." Restate the emotion the person is describing, such as, "Wow, that sounds like it was scary for you." Ask for more information. Reflective questions that require more than one-word responses are best. Point out the person's strengths, such as, "I'm amazed at how much courage that took."

What should they not do?

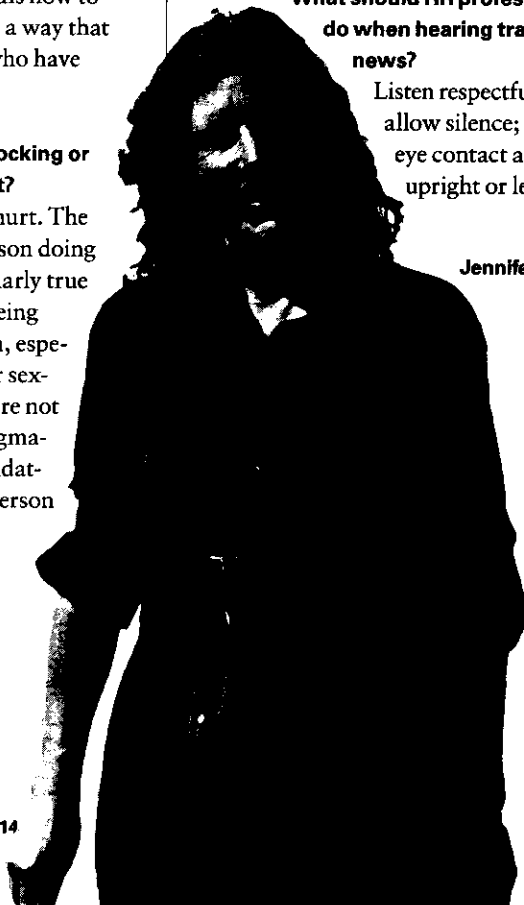
Don't discount the information or discredit the speaker. Don't minimize, but don't overreact either. Don't change the subject or ask questions that are off-topic. Focus on the person's experience, not your own. Avoid making inappropriate facial gestures, such as eye-rolling or eyebrow-raising. Don't interrupt, but do nod and say little things like "uh-huh" to encourage the person to keep talking.

What should an HR professional do if an employee is distraught and inconsolable?

Ask the employee how she usually gets support. If it is from a friend or family member, encourage the employee to contact that person. If appropriate, provide a referral to a mental health professional or bring the employee to a professional mental health facility. Do not leave her alone if she is significantly distraught.

You say in your book that nondisclosure of trauma hampers healing. How can HR professionals encourage employees to feel comfortable enough to disclose?

By showing respect in all areas of employment. Make it clear that the company values hearing about problems in



Jennifer Freyd

the workplace that could cause trauma as early as possible and that whistle-blowers will be cherished, not punished.

Is it institutional betrayal to punish whistle-blowers?

Yes. Institutions have the power to betray in many ways—including the failure to protect whistle-blowers.

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My doctoral student Carly Smith and I found that when institutions respond poorly to events such as sexual assaults, it increases the victims' emotional distress.

In 2013, we published a research study of 345 female university students and found that 68 percent of them had at least one unwanted sexual experience in their lifetimes. Forty-six percent of those victims also experienced a betrayal by the institution where the incidents occurred.

Those who experienced institutional betrayal suffered the most in four post-trauma categories, including anxiety and dissociation.

So assault is toxic, but institutional

betrayal is an additional level of harm.

How can HR professionals prevent institutional betrayal?

Ask yourself what your company is doing to prevent dishonorable behavior. Are you taking proactive steps? Or are you creating an environment in which this type of experience appears to be no big deal? Are you making it easy or difficult for victims and whistle-blowers to report wrongdoing? Are you responding adequately to reports?

Institutions will benefit from responding well, and so will their employees. ■

Kathryn Tyler is a freelance writer and former HR generalist and trainer in Wixom, Mich.