

CONFLICT

What Your Coworkers Need Right Now Is Compassion

by [Amy Gallo](#)

March 30, 2020



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I don't know about you, but I'm finding it very easy to be judgmental these days. Late last week, a coworker told me on Slack that she was going to be offline for a bit while she greeted her babysitter, who was showing up any minute. My immediate thought was, "*That's not social distancing.*" For a split second I was mad at her. *How could she let another person into her house*

at this time? Why isn't she doing her part to flatten the curve? My feelings soon morphed into guilt and then into sadness and grief. I didn't want to be annoyed with my coworker. So why was I?

I've heard from lots of friends that they've had similar moments of tension with their colleagues over the past few weeks. It makes sense: Many of us are working in new and suboptimal conditions. We're dealing with unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety. And the future of our jobs, our companies, and the economy is uncertain.

All of this lays the groundwork for tension, says Brianna Caza, an associate professor of management in the Bryan School of Business and Economics at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She and her coauthors reviewed 300 studies focusing on workplace relationships, relationship transgressions, and relationship repair. They found that "anytime there's external tension it can manifest between coworkers."

Unfortunately, in stressful situations our compassion goes out the window, according to Monica Worline, a research scientist at Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. "When we're under severe stress, we go back to coping patterns that are familiar and very hardened in us, and we have a hard time seeing that there's any other way to do what we're doing. We think we're right and others are wrong," she explains. This isn't good for your interactions with your colleagues. "We unwittingly break our relationships with coworkers, causing more suffering."

This is not a time to move away from kindness and caring, even if our brains nudge us in that direction. "It's important to try to find ways to remain open to compassion, even when we're overtaxed." Worline and Jane Dutton, who co-wrote *Awakening Compassion at Work*, have done research that shows that compassion correlates with your own level of job satisfaction and the degree to which you find your work meaningful. But how do you find and show empathy for coworkers when your cognitive resources are depleted?

Here's what Caza and Worline told me.

Remember this is an opportunity for connection.

Caza and her coauthors found in their research that “there were lots of triggers and pathways to fractures in relationships,” but there was also “the potential for stronger relationships in these stressful times. Anytime things get shaken up, there’s a potential for a positive shift,” she explains. And because this crisis is global, almost everyone is affected in some way. I’ve seen this happen in the past few weeks. Coworkers — some of whom I don’t interact with very often — have reached out to see how I’m doing, and I, in turn, have done the same for others. That sense that we’re in this together that can be uniting, even when — or because — we are under extreme duress.

Accept that we’re all coping differently.

Another coworker of mine shared an article about the strain on marriages during the crisis that shed some light on why things might feel tense in some of our working relationships. In it, relationship expert Esther Perel pointed out that people often have different coping mechanisms. Some individuals like to take in as much information as possible, spending hours on Twitter or reading article after article. Others like to limit the amount of news they take in. Some may be rigid about social distancing (that’s me) while someone else may take a more flexible approach. And some colleagues may throw themselves into work, finding comfort in being busy, while others struggle to keep up and stay focused.

There’s also a difference in how optimistic or pessimistic people feel. I see this play out daily in virtual meetings when someone asks people how they’re doing and one person says “Great!” and another mutters “Meh.” These are all valid responses, and we don’t have to have the same ways of coping.

Caza says the difference isn’t just in coping approaches, but in circumstances as well. Colleagues aren’t being affected by the crisis in the same ways. Some are working at home with young children and are now tasked with homeschooling. Others have parents or other older relatives who they are concerned about. For some, work has gotten more intense, while others’ workloads have lightened. Several of my colleagues have regularly worked at home over the years and are well set up. Others don’t have quiet places at home to take calls, never mind be on a video call.

Be generous in your interpretations.

Given the likely variance between you and your coworkers, both Worline and Caza say that one of the most important things you can do right now is to be generous in your interpretations of other people. If you get a curt email, don't assume the person is annoyed or being rude. Instead, imagine that they are under time pressure and didn't have time for their usual niceties.

This is hard to do, explains Worline. "When we are in a crisis, we change the way we interpret things going around us. Our own pain and suffering tends to loom large, and we diminish that people are going through the same strain or more. We are more easily overwhelmed by other's needs and suffering and may react by thinking, 'There's nothing I can do about that,' or 'That's their problem and not mine.'"

When tensions come up, try to think about why you and your colleague may not be communicating well. Don't get stuck in right-wrong thinking. Worline suggests you tell yourself, "I'm capable and I'm surrounded by people who are also capable," and then ask, "Where are the bottlenecks and how are we communicating?" By focusing on the dynamic and the circumstances, rather than the person, you're likely to get to the underlying issue without placing blame.

Acknowledge how you're feeling.

You can avoid miscommunication and hurt feelings by making clear what you're experiencing at the moment. For example, Caza suggests you explain to your coworkers that you might need some space, especially if things are moving fast. You might say, "There's a lot of anxiety and stress right now, so let me take some time to think about it." And communicate more than you might under normal circumstances, being more conscientious about what you say and the tone you convey. I got a note from a colleague on Slack the other day that said, "I've been hopping from convo to convo and just realized that the above came across as very blunt — it wasn't intended to be that way. We're all doing a lot!" I had noticed her message was terse, but luckily didn't take it personally. If you do feel something unhealthy brewing between you and a colleague, don't let it fester. It's better to address it sooner rather than later, says Caza.

And don't beat yourself up if you do say something you regret or inadvertently hurt a colleague. "The more you can have compassion for yourself and failings at being the person you want to be the more you can lower your stress," says Worline.

Accept that your coworkers' home lives are now relevant to you.

Because we tend to distance ourselves from other's suffering when we're under stress, you may find yourself thinking that it's not your problem that your coworker has two kids and no childcare, for example. "Their parenting situation wasn't necessarily relevant to your work and how they did their job a few weeks ago," says Worline. But it sure is now. "Recognize that the relevance has changed because of the situation we're in." Here she suggests another shift in thinking: "People are essentially good and they're trying to do their best." Instead of getting annoyed your coworker keeps getting interrupted by their child, put down the judgment and think about how you might adjust the patterns of how you work together. How can you be more flexible so everyone can continue to get their work done?

Don't compare suffering.

One of the recurring comments I've seen on social media when people complain about what they're going through is something along the lines of: "At least you're not working in healthcare right now." Worline says that kind of comparison can be "brutally diminishing." "People mistakenly think they are giving some much-needed perspective. But it doesn't alleviate the distress, it just adds a level of judgment and guilt, and exacerbates the pain." Worline points out that there are myriad forms of hardship and that "compassion doesn't involve judging the relevance of another's suffering."

In light of this advice, here are a few things I'm trying to remind myself every day to conscientiously and deliberately lean into empathy and kindness.

My coworkers and I don't see the world in the exact same way and that's OK.

We have different ways of coping with uncertainty, grief, and stress.

They are under pressures that I don't always see and can't fully understand (and probably aren't entirely my business).

It's not helpful to me or to them to compare our challenges.


We are all doing the best we can.

It's not always easy to be patient and understanding, especially with everything going on. But I'm going to keep trying because it's what my coworkers and I deserve.



Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Watch her TEDx talk on conflict and follow her on Twitter at @amyegallo.

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