

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Special COVID-19 Edition

Episode #2: WorkWell: Showing Empathy for yourself and others

COVID-19 and the global response continues to disrupt routines that we've taken for granted, as new developments impact our work, family, and social lives daily. With efforts focused on slowing community spread, many of us are now working from home. While we're hearing the term social distancing every day, I prefer the phrase "physical distancing." It's so important to maintain social connections, even if they're at a greater physical distance to help remind us that we're not alone.

Hi, I'm Jen Fisher – Deloitte US Chief Well-being Officer, and I'm here today to talk about how showing empathy can help you and your colleagues navigate the adjustment to a new working environment.

Empathy, or being able to understand at an emotional level what someone else is going through, is part of what makes us human. It also provides several important benefits. According to psychologists, empathy makes it easier to build social connections because by understanding what someone else is feeling, you can respond more appropriately. Practicing empathy also better equips you to manage your emotions, which can help you from feeling overwhelmed. When you show empathy for others, you're more likely to help them. And, of course, that means when other people show empathy, they're more likely to help you.

Being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes is a skill that requires some practice. In fact, during times of stress, empathy can be HARD. Here are a few tips to help you show empathy with others who, like you, may be adjusting to a new, remote working environment:

- Be patient. Try to recognize that many are working in a different home environment. For example, not everyone has a dedicated office space, so some of your colleagues may be dealing with additional distractions. I've already met three of my team members' dogs virtually! With so many schools currently closed, they will also likely be taking care of their children. Know that, like you, they are trying to do their best work under the circumstances.
- Be fully present. With face-to-face conversations giving way to Skype, Zoom, email and IM, it's even more important to focus on the other person and tune out distractions.

Video chats are a great way to maintain eye-to-eye contact – you can even introduce your kids and pets! On phone calls, listen actively to what others are saying rather than mentally rehearsing your response. Giving your full attention shows you care, and it will be obvious, even without gestures or eye contact.

- Be considerate. If emails and instant messaging have suddenly replaced in-person conversations, pay attention to your tone to avoid unintentionally confusing or stressing the person on the receiving end of your message. Your language is also important, so you may want to watch for statements that come across as judging or criticizing rather than acknowledging and moving the conversation forward. I regularly do a “tone check” with my team to make sure my message is received the way I intended it.
- Be kind. As you’re able to tune in to the feelings of others, you will find it easier to practice simple acts of kindness. I’ve found that taking a few minutes for team members to say hello on a call before diving into the agenda helps to lighten the mood, which sets us up for a more productive virtual meeting. Giving a colleague a few words of encouragement – such as letting them know they’re doing a great job – can also make a significant impact. Being kind not only benefits the recipient; science has shown that practicing kindness lowers stress levels and blood pressure while increasing energy.

Of course, showing empathy extends beyond the work environment. If you’re sharing your remote work space with a spouse, partner, roommate, or child, you have more opportunities to show empathy! Patience, politeness, being fully present, kind and considerate all apply here as well. Your child’s disappointment that their ball game or play date has been canceled may seem small in the overall scheme of world events, but empathy makes it easier to validate their feelings and help them cope with the disruption.

Your family, particularly parents and older relatives or friends, may be experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety. You may need to check in on them more frequently, even if it’s just to let them know that you’re okay (knowing that may reduce their anxiety level).

Don’t forget your friends, whose lives have also been disrupted. Take time to virtually connect with them and ask how they’re doing.

While it may seem like a contradiction, it’s also important to show empathy for yourself – self-care is critical and acknowledging your own emotions and anxieties can help you take steps to manage them. Though you’re likely not flying, remember the pre-flight instructions to put the oxygen mask on your face first before trying to help others.

Remember, we’re all in this together. I hope you found these tips. Until next time, stay well, everyone.