

# How to Respond to Someone Who Just Got Bad News at Work (Don't Say 'Look on the Bright Side')

When you see your friend or colleague at work, you hopefully get a warm smile, a friendly hello, and maybe a little chat about your favorite TV show that was on last night. But at times, as soon as you see them, you know something's wrong.

You want to say something helpful and supportive. But you don't know what to say, so you can just rely on some old standbys, right?

Nope. Here are three things you may want to say but should skip:

## 1. "I know how you feel."

You may be trying to be sympathetic, but you're making what happened to your colleague about *your* experience, not theirs. You may have been in a similar situation, but what you went through may not be comparable to what they are going through. And even if it's really relatable, you still don't know what *they* are going through.

## 2. "Look on the bright side."

Typically, we offer this bon mot because we're uncomfortable that someone else is uncomfortable. We want them to feel better quickly for their own benefit, of course, but also so that we don't have to experience the pain, frustration or disappointment by association. When we do this--even with the best of intentions--we're denying our peer their right to feel their feelings.

Stop trying to get your colleague not to experience the dark side, especially if that's where they are right this minute. The bright side might come into their view at some point--but not because you told them so, and not a moment before they are ready.

## 3. "Everything happens for a reason."

Scientists, philosophers and clergy (among many others) have been arguing whether or not this is true for centuries. What makes you the final arbiter of whether someone's setback, misfortune or tragedy serves a higher or future purpose? Furthermore, that may be what *you* believe, but it may not be aligned to what *they* believe. If they do hold that perspective to be true for them, they will come to it themselves, on their own time. They won't need you to remind them. And if they *don't* believe that, you're not helping them by trying to get them to think like you do - especially while they may be having trouble thinking clearly at all.

So, what *can* you say, if now you're feeling speechless? Try one of these:

**1. "I'm sorry this is happening to you."**

Yes, it's a tiny bit about you ("I'm sorry") but it's mostly expressing your awareness and compassion for the fact that your colleague is going through something upsetting. It also is morally neutral - it's happening "to you" rather than "you brought this on yourself."

**2. "What do you need right now--and what don't you need?"**

This is a way to communicate that you're willing to help. It is also a way to share that you *don't know and can't assume* what would qualify as help from their perspective. If you got laid off, you might want help updating your resume--but they might want someone to make some professional introductions. Or they might want everyone to STOP making so many professional introductions because there just not ready.

**3. "I wish I knew exactly what to say, but I don't. And I am here for you anyway."**

I learned this one from my son Jacob. He can recognize when I am in a funk, but he doesn't know exactly what to say when he sees it. Nevertheless, he is brave enough to approach me rather than ignore my mood, and admit that he may not have the right words, but he is present with me. And just being there is better than just being eloquent.