

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My good friend Denise is going through a difficult divorce. When I ask how she's doing, she always puts on a smile and says, "I'm just fine." I would believe her, except that every once in a while she has a melt-down (usually after a few cocktails). She cries her heart out, and can't be consoled. The next day, she apologizes for "losing it," and continues to say she's handling things. I don't know how to help her. Any thoughts?

-- Trying to be a good friend

Dear Good Friend,

Denise has a hard time asking for help, and this is not a good thing...especially when she's in the middle of a major loss like the dissolution of her marriage. Perhaps she believes that handling things alone, and not relying on the support of friends during this difficult time is a sign of strength, but I disagree. Strength comes in many flavors, and one of them is the ability to ask for what we need from others. It is not necessary to "tough it out" alone when life hands us a difficult, challenging time.

Denise might want to ask herself why it is so hard to open up and accept the loving support of friends. Is she afraid that she will appear weak if she admits she might be in over her head? Is she afraid that she'll be criticized? Does she feel as though she'll "owe" her friends something in the future? Has she asked for help in the past, and not received it? These are the kinds of questions that demand self-reflection on her part. By carefully considering the answers to these questions Denise may come to realize that her friends are there for her; just as she would be there for them. There is healing in the comfort of friends and family, especially when we are suffering.

Holding in feelings is not the answer for Denise, or for anyone else for that matter. Think about a volcano here: pressure builds up, until finally there's an eruption. Psychological energy has to have a place to go. If it is not released in healthy ways -- like talking with a friend or therapist, writing in a journal, or expressing one's feelings through painting, dancing, or music -- that pressure will come exploding out. The disinhibiting effects of alcohol are often a trigger. Alcohol, by the way, is the very last thing Denise should be using to reduce her pain. Alcohol is a depressant and is not helping her to heal. This is a terrible coping strategy, and Denise will be healthier in every way if she limits or stops drinking. She will need to be self-honest about whether or not she has an ongoing problem with alcohol. If she cannot drink responsibly, she might consider attending AA meetings, or working with a counselor trained in substance abuse.

Tell Denise how much you care about her, and clearly tell her that you're there for her. Let her know that you understand that divorce is one of the most painful things a person can experience. It's a death of sorts -- the death of an important relationship. Directly ask Denise what you can do to be the most support her. Help her to help you clarify your role as a friend during this time.

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Include Denise in activities that will help get her mind off her problems, but also understand that there are times when she may decline your offer to get together. Respect that this is a very emotional time, and be understanding of her need for space at certain times.

Be a good listener, and avoid giving direct advice or opinions. Remember, you are her friend, not her attorney or therapist. Help point out resources for her. Many communities have support groups for newly separated and divorced people, and these can be very helpful in getting through the crisis points and difficult moments after the end of a relationship. You might ask Denise to consider talking with a counselor or therapist who can also help her through this. She's lucky to have such a caring friend.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.