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How to Encourage the Newly Jobless
By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

"Wow, Kathleen, what can I say? You brought tears to my eyes. Your package was amazing! The thought that went into preparing it is overwhelming. I am listening to the CD right now, and it is wonderful. I will begin the book shortly, and the stickers are on my desk to remind me to keep fighting and reaching for my goal. I am truly touched. Thanks so much. You made this situation better with your kindness."

That was the message I read yesterday when I sat down at my computer first thing in the afternoon – yes, I get up as late as possible on Saturdays. The gratitude expressed brought tears to **my** eyes.

To fill you in on the background, the e-mail came from a woman I met in 2002 in my work as a self-employed corporate communications trainer. She and about 250 of her co-workers lost their jobs a few weeks ago as part of a cost-cutting move prompted by the ongoing financial meltdown spreading throughout the world. To provide encouragement, last weekend I sent her a KARE (Kathleen Acts Really Empathetic) package. It contained everything she mentioned, including the stickers with sayings such as "Keep growing, keep dreaming" and "Live in peace and peace will live in you."

Now in case you're thinking that I'm a saintly and selfless woman, forget about it. I regard my KARE packages as my unbreakable duty to pass forward, especially in the often cold and cruel business world. As you may have guessed, I, too, unexpectedly have lost my job. Unlike the email writer, laid off with many others in a restructuring, I was fired 20 years ago for poor performance in a position I had begun just six weeks earlier.

I could tell you that the primary reason for my unceremonious ouster was a personality conflict with my manager. But, if the truth be known, I was so distraught over an unwanted and excruciating divorce that I could barely function at work or anywhere else. I gave new meaning to sleeping on the job. After adding my career to a series of life-shattering losses, I dissolved into what definitely qualified as post-traumatic syndrome. Despite my efforts to withdraw from the world by staying in bed for the rest of my life, which I hoped would be short, I eventually regained confidence and competence through the support of my family and friends – and one other person.

She was a woman I had worked with for the first time on the now-gone job. For an entire year, she regularly called to offer encouragement and companionship. Even then, in my confused head, I recognized the courage it took for her to lend a hand and a heart to one of her employer's rejects: me. I was on such a steep and swift downhill that she had absolutely nothing to gain from befriending me.

I made a vow that, in the future, I would show the same compassion to other people suffering one of life's biggest stressors: job loss. I would pass forward her support. As you might imagine, with 10 million Americans currently on unemployment lines, I'm now having an almost unlimited opportunity to live up to the promise to myself.

Besides the KARE package recipient I mentioned earlier, I know a distressing number of good people who have been canned for reasons beyond their control: a book editor, a school administrator, a training coordinator, a mortgage broker, a computer programmer, a graphic artist, an events stager, and an electrical engineer, to name a specific few. To be honest, I wish that I could wave a magic wand and make everything instantly better for all of them.



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But I'm merely human. So I take small steps: I write emails, I send encouragement cards, and I bundle up inspirational doodads. And you know what? Each time I do, I feel incredibly grateful to the many people – especially the woman who faced down possible criticism from the company that dumped me -- who have propped me up in times of sheer hopelessness. Considering the huge number of employers now tightening their belts, I suspect you, too, know individuals who have been freshly pink-slipped. Here are some ideas for handling this awkward situation:

Avoid judgments. To make yourself feel secure in your job, you may fall into the human trap of blaming the victim: your now-gone colleague. If your former cubicle mate had only adopted your work ethic and put in longer hours, you may tell yourself, the person would still be employed. Therefore, you continue in your mental denial, your 12-hour days give you immunity from ever getting economically whacked. Ah, if only it were so. While such logic may ring true in your befuddled brain, it's wrong. Many bright individuals lose their livelihoods every single day.

Show bravery. If you remain at a recently purged organization, you may worry about putting your own future in jeopardy by reaching out to a former peer who is now persona non grata. Do it anyway. Having coffee with an ex-colleague is hardly grounds for your dismissal. OK, meet in a place off the beaten track of your manager and co-workers. But meet. This is no time to be a wuss.

Focus on listening. As part of a problem-solving society, you may think that you must have all the answers. But most people undergoing trauma – and believe me, getting escorted out of the office without time to pack your belongings is a trauma – need quiet affirmation rather than advice, recommendations, and suggestions. So take the preaching-and-teaching burden off your shoulders.

Avoid all-or-nothing thinking. If you just are unable to find the right words to say, do something instead. Giving a job-bereaved neighbor a box of chocolate chip cookies requires zippo eloquence. To guarantee a non-conversational experience, try dropping off your gift in the middle of the night, kind of like a pass forward Santa.

Keep it simple. It's unnecessary to write fired associates a check big enough to pay their mortgages for a year – although it's certainly OK to write one for me. In most cases, a \$10 gift card to the movies will help get a colleague's mind off a difficult plight for a few hours.

Forget the outcome. Over time, you may become too enmeshed in the other person's behavior. As a result, you get impatient when the individual fails to land a job – or even look for one – within the first few weeks of unemployment. Sorry to disappoint you folks, but replacing a professional position today often takes close to a year. Give yourself gold stars for your actions, not the other person's reactions

Keep going. Years after I hit professional and personal bottom, the roles have reversed between me and my two-decades-ago cheerleader. I'm back on my feet, relatively speaking. She's looking for a job. A few hours ago, on my voicemail, I found a message from her saying "I need your career advice. I think I'm at some sort of crossroad." Need I say that she immediately leapfrogged to the number-one spot on my people-to-call list?