



By Peggy Post and P.M. Forni

Adversity changes the way people behave.

It's human nature to rise to the challenge of hardship -- and it often can bring people closer together. But just as frequently, people unload their stress, dread and frustration on those closest to them, damaging their most important relationships. The end result? Relationships can become just another casualty of the current economic crisis.

Stress is the main cause of rude and abusive behavior. But take note: Etiquette is a particularly effective and attainable resource for weathering difficult times. Now is the time to use the principles of etiquette -- honesty, respect and consideration -- to make your personal and professional relationships less vulnerable. Here's how:

Evaluate your behavior and anticipate the likelihood of rudeness. Expect others to be less patient, tolerant and courteous. You've likely already seen more neediness, complaining or gruffness from those around you (and maybe they've witnessed this behavior in you?). Be even more patient and understanding with the world at large.

Don't let money woes mess up your relationships. Be sensitive to a friend's concern about spending. Respect the financial limitations of others -- and respect your own. It's OK to replace filet mignon with pasta. Be realistic and focus on each other, not on the money.

Watch out for others who may not be coping well. Someone nodding off in a meeting may not have slept the night before because of anxiety. Someone who is usually gregarious but refuses to join her co-workers for lunch may be struggling with depression. Reach out if you know the co-worker well or if she reports to you. Be a good listener. If you think it's depression, encourage her to seek help. Respect your co-worker's privacy by keeping what you know about her situation confidential.

Be a prophet of boom, not doom. Lose the catastrophic predictions and discouraging language. Look for hopeful developments, and let everybody know you as a bearer of good news ("I just had a great meeting with a potential new client."). More optimistic conversations will create a positive mood in your household and workplace.

Make time to reassure others. Ask your laid-off friend how she's doing, and let her know you're there for her. Reassure a co-worker that your relationship is in good standing. Talk to your kids about what's going on and how it may affect your family. And make time for some simple family fun: A trip to the park can wipe out a case of gloom.

Communicate often. If you're in a leadership position, talk often with those who aren't. Nothing dispels anxiety in the workplace like the flow of candid information. Likewise, seek information. Ask your boss where the company stands on potential cutbacks. The answer can either allay your fears or spur you to assess other opportunities.

The forecast may continue to be bleak for some time. But eventually things will get better. We are a resilient nation, built on hope and optimism. Respectful, kind and considerate behavior will help us get there.

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