

Walk a Mile in Your Shoes

I am a Caucasian male, over fifty years old, married and a father. While some of my personal side has crept into these newsletters since I began writing them about fifteen months ago, I do my best to take into account that many members do not in any way fit my personal profile; and I attempt to appeal to as many of our members as possible and to avoid being insensitive to any of them. About a month ago, I addressed in Newsletter, Vol. 3 No 7, the idea that others in our lives depend upon us for support and companionship and that while we endure the mental challenges of being in transition, we must communicate our feelings to them and help them as best we can. In writing that missive, I thought I was speaking to our single members as well and assumed that most or all of them would have either a special relationship with someone or at least have some close friends or family members to whom they could turn for support. In spite of my best intentions, I overlooked something very significant. Many of our single members lack the safety net of the possible spousal second income, which many of our married members enjoy. Even if no second income exists in a marriage, many single people lack the critical second opinion and emotional support necessary when making important financial and career decisions that they might otherwise receive from a lifelong partner. So too, even though some of them may be in a somewhat recent special or committed relationship and have a circle of close friends, it is somehow not the same as being married to someone for many years. A spouse who is a real soul mate can often read your thoughts and fears without you voicing them. And even though they may only give you a smile, a few brief words of encouragement or hold your hand, in many cases, that's enough to make your stress go away for awhile. Sometimes such gestures, small as they seem when measured against seemingly insurmountable problems, are more precious and helpful than we realize.

A solid marriage or committed relationship can be a real safety net. Conversely, a marriage or relationship in trouble can be like a preview of hell. Some single people are very self-reliant and are perfectly content to live alone possibly enjoying the company of a faithful pet. Yet I can't imagine what it must be like to be middle aged, out of work, wondering if your career is finished and have absolutely no spouse, companion or family to turn to for support, especially if you relocated to your most recent position and now live in strange surroundings. This becomes even more challenging if you have an ethnic minority background or if you immigrated to the US. I wonder if some of these people would welcome being in a marriage with its ups and downs, rather than face their current predicament alone. Many years ago, my wife shared a story with me about a former co-worker, who terminally ill, drove herself to the hospital for the last time, simply because she had no close family or friends to assist her. She passed away a few days later. I never met this person, but my wife's story created an image in my mind that I can't dismiss.

Everything is relative. Some of us have endured problems calmly that would cause others considerable stress. People who have faced military combat, debilitating illness, life-threatening situations, financial ruin, and death of loved ones, unemployment or any number of catastrophes are going to see things differently than those who have not. While some are quite able to face such tests with faith, composure and grace, many others cannot. I submit that most of us would rather face life's challenges with a support system than we would alone.

There are no easy answers to this and while I am attempting to summon some ideas which would make sense for our single members, I can't find any. It's a cinch to list some bulleted items such as speaking with a trusted clergy member, seeking out a support group, going for professional counseling or frequently speaking with friends both in person and over the phone. However, it is not the same when you have to call for an appointment, wait until the third Wednesday of every month at 7:30 PM, pay out over one hundred dollars per hour or bother someone when they may be dealing with their own problems. These don't work when an anxiety attack hits you at eleven at night. Certainly performing volunteer work can be fulfilling intellectually, emotionally and socially and should be embraced, but it may not be enough to wipe away personal concerns.

Dealing with extended unemployment while living alone also may be more challenging for women than it is for men. While there are a growing number of top female executives, it's still a man's world when it comes to business. Women don't always have as many contacts as men do and may feel more isolated. They haven't been in the executive suite as long, in many cases they have had to work harder to get there and are probably not part of an "old boy network". Let's face it; many male executives still feel threatened by women who challenge them for positions of power and authority. On a positive note, I must say that I have witnessed some excellent collaboration among members of both genders at the local chapter level within TENG. I can only hope that this continues. While I can't please everyone all the time, I sincerely desire that none of our members feel slighted by my opinions and comments or by the behavior of fellow members.

Within TENG, dealing with support issues such as this will be best accomplished at the local level. Members of some chapters have shared stories of how chapter leadership makes a special effort to identify and speak with any member who appears unusually quiet or disconsolate. Sometimes, an encouraging word or gesture is all it takes to help another member face one more day. Perhaps you are growing tired of chapter meetings, elevator speeches and the like. Attend the next TENG chapter meeting in your area anyway. You may be uplifted by the words and thoughts of a colleague. Better yet, you may be more uplifted if you provide such words and support for another member.

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Ed Pospesil
Chairman
Technology Executives Network GroupSM

Vice President
Bruner Consulting Associates, Inc.
33 Elizabeth Street, 3rd Floor
Derby, CT 06418
epospesil@brunerconsulting.com
www.brunerconsulting.com
Phone: 866-566-2224 / 203-732-7084
Fax: 203-732-9033

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