

# Frontline Employee

March 2021

A newsletter from the Washington State Employee Assistance Program

## Responding to Hostile Communication: The BIFF Approach

Is there someone in your life who sends hostile emails or texts to you, posts snide comments on social media, or tries to engage you in a highly-charged conversation? This could be an ex, a co-parent, a colleague, a family member, or someone else in your circle. Next time, consider responding using the [BIFF Approach](#), developed by the [High Conflict Institute](#) and recommended by a wide range of professionals including [lawyers](#), [ombuds](#), and [therapists](#). In a nutshell, “BIFF” stands for:



- **Brief:** if possible, keep your response to no more than a paragraph, even if they sent you a three page rambling email.
- **Informative:** stay factual and neutral. Leave out opinions, advice, sarcasm, threats or counter-attacks.
- **Friendly:** in the face of hostility and negativity it can be difficult to keep a friendly tone. Try an opening like “Thank you for sharing your view” or “I appreciate hearing your perspective,” and a closing such as “Have a nice weekend” or “Take care.”
- **Firm:** State your position on the issue with finality. Don’t make comments that invite further discussion.

Check out these [examples of responses using the BIFF approach](#), as well as additional strategies for [dealing with high conflict people](#).

If you’d like additional support with difficult people or situations in your life, contact the EAP at 1-877-313-4455 or [online](#).

## Upcoming Live Webinars

### Orientation to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Presented by: Kari Uhlman, MA, LMHC- EAP Counselor

- Tuesday, March 16, 2021 10:00 am—10:30 am [Register](#)
- Thursday, April 22, 2021 1:30pm – 2:00pm [Register](#)
- Wednesday, May 19, 2021 9:00am – 9:30am [Register](#)



WASHINGTON STATE

Important Notices: 1. \*Links to external websites are provided as a convenience. The Employee Assistance Program and the Department of Enterprise Services do not endorse the contents, services, or viewpoints found at these external sites. 2. Information in Frontline Employee is for general informational purposes only and is not intended to replace the counsel or advice of a qualified health or legal professional. For further help, questions, or referral to community resources for specific problems or personal concerns, contact the EAP or other qualified professional.

# How to Be Supportive to Someone Who is Struggling

When people around us are struggling, it can be hard to know what to say. We want to be supportive, and many of us find ourselves saying something encouraging and upbeat, like “stay positive!,” “look on the bright side!,” or “it could be worse.”

It’s true that having a positive outlook on life is good for our mental health and wellbeing: positive thinking has been linked to [many health benefits](#), including an increased life span, better cardiovascular health, a stronger immune system [and more](#). And, when taken to an extreme, cultivating a positive mindset can become [toxic positivity](#): the belief that it’s best to maintain a positive mindset no matter what happens. This causes us to turn away from our own and others’ authentic emotions and experiences if we perceive them to be negative. The result? We are unable to respond completely to the full range of emotions and experience of others, they don’t feel understood or supported and eventually stop turning to us for help because they can’t trust us to hear and understand what’s really going on with them.

Instead, to offer support, start with what’s most important: be present, pay attention and listen. You can show that you’re paying attention by using [attentive body language](#) such as turning your body toward the speaker, making eye contact, and nodding, as appropriate.

You don’t have to know exactly what to say, and you may feel awkward as you try a different approach: that’s OK, it’s better to be awkward and real than skillful and fake.

Here are some examples of some common inappropriately positive statements and more supportive alternatives:

Instead of Saying	Try
Stay positive!	I’m here for you, no matter what.
Look on the bright side!	I don’t really know what to say. I just want you to know that I love you, and I’m so glad you told me.
It could be worse.	I’m listening. <or> I hear you.
Happiness is a choice.	I’m so sorry that you’re having to deal with this. <or> I’m so sorry this happened to you.
Things happen for a reason.	I have faith in you.
Well, at least <x> didn’t happen.	That must be really hard.
It’s always darkest before the dawn.	It makes a lot of sense that you feel that way.
See the good in everything!	I want to support you. What can I do to help?
Don’t be so negative!	Your feelings are valid.

Unsure of how to put this all together in a way that sounds natural? In his TEDx talk [How Toxic Positivity Leads to More Suffering](#) Mahmoud Khedr gives this example of supportive language:

“<First name>, I hear you. I see that you’ve gone through some really difficult stuff lately, and I’m here for you. It’s OK to feel crappy – crappy stuff happens, and I’m willing to listen to anything that you’ll tell me.”

You can reach out to the EAP to talk through some alternatives to address your specific situation, at 1-877-313-4455 or [online](#).