The Complex Role of a Confidant

The role of a confidant is a complex one – sometimes flattering and fulfilling and, other times, challenging and exhausting. Fortunately, there are many things we can do to make sure we are comfortable with being a confidant for someone else.

When we are a confidant, we are a person to whom another feels at ease sharing his/her feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Often, such feelings, thoughts and beliefs are those that the person would not readily disclose to others. Thus, the person trusts us to protect his/her privacy and not share the information with other people.

Sometimes, the expectation for us to maintain this confidence is explicit. For example, when the person directly says, “I need you to keep this quiet…” or “What I’m sharing is private and needs to remain between the two of us.” Other times, the expectation is implicit, and the person assumes that we will not disclose the information with anyone else. (The assumption might be made based on the personal or classified nature of what was shared.)

Indeed it can feel like a privilege to be someone’s confidant. It’s flattering to know that another person feels that we are trustworthy and understanding enough to receive information. And, if the person is disclosing information to us in the hopes that we will provide guidance about it, it can make us feel important and valued. Having another person feel comfortable enough with us to be vulnerable with his/her true feelings, can give us a tremendous sense of satisfaction.

Yet, at times, being someone’s confidant can also feel like a burden. We may feel this way if the person becomes too needy for our time or counsel. Having him/her constantly coming to us for support may, eventually, wear down our goodwill. Additionally, we can get frustrated if we offered advice, but feel that the person ignored it or is taking no action to improve his/her situation.

We can also feel as if being a confidant is a burden if the person tends to use us for emotional “dumping,” whereby he/she appears focused only on sharing his/her current feelings, but never seems concerned with our emotional experiences. While the act of
releasing his/her feelings may make the person feel better, it may make us feel worse if it causes us to worry about or feel somehow responsible for his/her situation.

Being a confidant can also be burdensome if it creates a conflict for us. For example, if the person discloses something that we know he/she should not have shared and that we are uncomfortable knowing. Or, if the person discloses something on which we feel a legal or ethical obligation to act. These conflicts put us in a struggle between protecting ourselves and feeling an obligation to protect the other person’s privacy.

Thus, assertive communication is an important part of being a confidant. When we realize that another person is trusting us and turning to us more, we should be sure that we are comfortable with that role. If we aren’t, we should respectfully and directly tell him/her so.

If we are comfortable being a confidant, we might want to clarify our role – is it to be a listener, a cheerleader, or a problem-solver? We might also want to clarify the person’s expectation of confidentiality with the things he/she is sharing. (Doing so can prevent misunderstandings and frustrations from occurring.) Also, if we suspect it might be an issue, we might want to set boundaries with the other person so that he/she clearly understands how available we will be and what things we don’t want to be involved with (e.g., gossip, proprietary or illegal information, etc.).

Essentially, a confidant is a gift, but one that should both be given and received with great care and respect. When others give us this kind of trust, they should respect the boundaries and obligations of the confidant relationship and not take advantage of our kindness nor our confidence. Likewise, when we receive the opportunity to be a confidant, we should be both supportive of and assertive with the other person.

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