

Supporting Someone with Emotional Distress

Active listening

Below are some approaches that can help a distressed person feel heard and empowered and that can help diffuse overwhelming feelings. A different order may be more natural and an interaction may go forward and backwards through these steps a few times. At some point, however, repetitious talking may not be helpful and it will be important to explore options and take action steps.

- **Listen non-judgmentally** (allows the persons to decompress and begin to sort out feelings)
 - Go on...I'm listening...
 - Do you want to tell me more?
- **Reflect back** (provides assurance you are really listening, concerned and value the persons feelings)
 - I hear you are saying...
 - I want to be sure I understand...you are saying...
- **Provide empathy** (validate their feelings and make them feel supported)
 - I can only imagine how distressing that is...
 - How difficult...or...how painful...or...how worrisome!
- **Note strengths or positives if authentic** (helps find grounding, strength)
 - You are a strong...
 - You've handled a lot before...
 - People care about you...
- **Explore options**
 - What do you feel you need right now?
 - What might make this better?
 - What would you like to happen?
- **Select a first step, make a plan, meet a need**
 - Meet an immediate need if possible
 - General comfort – blanket, pillow, cup of tea, etc
 - Calming breathing (see reverse side)
 - Medication as appropriate (in a healthcare context)
 - Make an appointment or take somewhere for more intensive help
 - Call a trusted other
 - Affirm safety and offer other support options as needed.

If someone is actively suicidal or exhibiting unsafe behaviors

- Do not leave the person alone
- Eliminate access to guns, pills, or other potentially lethal means
- If you are not certain you can keep the person safe
 - Call for help (911 or other resources) *or*
 - Take the person to an emergency room, psychiatric crisis center, police station or other site while working on a longterm solution.

Instructions for calming breathing

- Rationale: When we are upset, we tend to breath shallowly which can increase anxiety. Slow deep breaths that raise the abdomen may stimulate a physiologic relaxation response.
- Preparation
 - Sit comfortably or recline in a comfortable position
 - Eyes can be open or closed as preferred. (Closed is more relaxing for many, but can invite intrusive disturbing images in some persons who have experienced trauma)
 - Rest a hand on your abdomen noting the slow rise and fall with breathing
- Breathing
 - Take a slow deep breath through the nose to a count of three
 - Hold one count
 - Let out through the mouth slowly to the count of three
 - Hold one count
- Repeat. 6-8 breaths a minute is often a calming rhythm, but find your own.

Other actions that can sometimes help calm

Note: everyone brings different experiences to their distress, so proceed only if comfortable for the individual and change course as needed.

- Identifying things for which one is grateful
- Walking (focusing on each step or on the environment can sometimes be helpful)
- Slowly repeating a positive thought, silently or aloud
- Stretching while breathing slowly
- Intentional sighing
- Exercise
- Distraction: music, funny movie, reading out loud, etc
- Sipping a warm beverage