LISTEN

When I ask you to listen me
and you start to give me advice,

You have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you say I shouldn’t feel that way,

You are trampling on my feelings

When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to solve my problems,

You have failed me, strange as that may seem

So please just listen and hear me

And if you want to talk,
wait a moment for your turn –

I promise I’ll listen to you
WHAT TO SAY - HOW TO COMFORT?

In communicating with people in the middle of a crisis, it is important to recognize that, whatever their situation, they are dealing with a loss and they are grieving...

GRIEF

Definition:
A normal human response to a significant loss or change

Grieving is not just about death:
- Major losses: Changes in health – Retirement - Leaving your home – Giving up driving
- Smaller consecutive losses related to aging: Eye sight - Mobility - Strength and endurance - Memory, etc.
- People you love as they once were
- Anticipatory grief: Future and impending losses

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross Stages of Grief
- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance
BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Fears:
- Fear of saying the wrong thing
- Fear of emotions – your own or theirs

Personal discomfort:
- There but for the grace of God…
- Memory of a personal loss
- Feeling helpless

Faulty assumptions:
- “He/she probably wants to be left alone”.
- “It is too soon….”
- “I’ll make him/her cry”
- “They are too young to understand” (children)

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Personal awareness
- What are your own values and beliefs?
- What are your expectations?
- How is your comfort level?
- Have you faced your own mortality?

Being there. Remember that your willingness to be present is of far greater importance than anything you say.

Initiate contact
- Do reach out and make contact.
- Don’t make assumptions about what someone else needs or wants – check it out!
- Keep reaching out
Listen, Listen, Listen.
Avoid euphemisms and platitudes
   • They are, as a rule, not helpful.
   • They are too easily used as a shield.

Do sit down. Standing while offering support gives the impression that you are either uncomfortable or in a hurry.

Make eye contact
   • Eye contact conveys interest and willingness
   • Avoiding eye contact conveys discomfort

Be aware of your body language
   • Facing the person
   • Leaning forward
   • Open palms
   • Avoid folding arms or hands on hips

Don’t be afraid of tears
   • Yours or theirs
   • You are not causing the tears
   • You words may help facilitate and giving permission for the expression of feelings
   • Your tears convey empathy

Silences are times of quiet reflection
   • Do not feel you have to break a silence

Do not make comparisons
   • They are not helpful
   • The underlying message of a comparison is: ”You don’t have a right to feel the way you do”.

Do not share your personal story
Pity parties are OK.

**Acknowledge your own helplessness.**
- ‘I don’t know”
- “I wish I could make this easier for you”
- “I don’t know what to say”

**Touch can be healing**
- Be sensitive to culture and individual comfort levels
- Always ask permission when you offer a hug
- Touch, when welcomed, is comforting and conveys caring

CRISIS INTERVENTION

People in crisis are often immobilized by what has happened. Encouraging people to talk and tell their story will help them out of the inertia so they can begin to deal with the crisis and make plans.

**Facts:** This is the least threatening avenue for opening communication with a person in crisis. When did they first become aware? What were the circumstances? Was this a complete shock? Who broke the news? Etc.

**Thoughts:** After the person starts to talk and relax a little bit, this is the next step. What was their first thought? What was their primary concern? Was it as bad as they thought?

**Feelings:** The emotional aftermath of a critical event may be very threatening, when people are struggling for control. Be respectful. “How are you feeling?” is too direct for many.

**Encouraging people to talk**
Dos and Don’ts
• Avoid closed questions.
• Avoid “Why” questions
• Avoid “yes” or “no” question
• Ask for clarification. “Tell me more about…” or “I can’t help but wonder how…”
• Make guesses: gives people permission to be where they are. “I imagine this is…difficult, challenging, scary…etc…”
• Make observations: You look…sad, angry, confused, lost…

SPIRITUAL CONCERNS

Physical and spiritual healing go hand in hand

Points to consider
• Most people have coping patterns. Learn how they usually find their comfort, and then help them connect with their resources.
• Support them where they are, even if their belief system differs from yours.
• Even deeply religious people may question God in times of distress.
• Faith based phrases are not always helpful, even if you know for a fact that people share your belief. They may send a secondary message that they should not feel the way they feel.
• Your own faith. If your faith is important to you and you feel sad when others do not seem to find comfort in the same way, just consider the words of Carl Jung:

“Called or not called, God is present”
HOW DO YOU GET BETTER AT THIS?

Using these simple procedures will speed you on your way to learning how to comfort. These communication skills can be learned in a series of 10 minute sessions.

- Carry a notepad or 3x5 filing card
- Whenever a situation occurs that leaves you wondering about your response. Or if you catch yourself using an old well-worn phrase – write the exchange down.
- When you have time to practice, take out your notes and write down (don’t just think them) 5 other ways you could have responded.
- Rate you responses from most helpful to least helpful. Did you:
  - Recognize their world has been turned upside down
  - Validate their feelings
  - Encourages sharing: fact, thought, feelings
  - Offer assistance or resources
- Remember: any new skill feels awkward at first!
- With consistent practice over time you develop your own repertoire of responses, and feel more confident in “reading” people and finding appropriate responses
- You will also discover that there are not many “wrong” things to say.
You are visiting with a friend whose husband has been receiving treatment for cancer several years. His treatment is not containing the cancer and she says “he just seems to be giving up….”

You meet an old friend on the street and inquire about his wife. He starts to cry and says “she died 4 months ago and I just can’t seem to get over it.”

An older person with early dementia is trying to communicate….can’t find the words and says:”I just can’t seem to get a damn thing out”

A friend tells you that her son has been in an automobile accident caused by his driving while intoxicated. He is now paralyzed from the waist down and wheel chair bound

1. _____________________________________________________

2. _____________________________________________________

3. _____________________________________________________

4. _____________________________________________________

5. _____________________________________________________