THIS WAY UP ⬆⬆

Helping You Take Care of Your Mental Health

Knowing What to Say

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Knowing What to Say

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It can be difficult to know what to say to someone who's facing a challenging situation, or how to express the way you feel and what you need when trying to cope with a crisis.

It can be especially challenging to communicate effectively when you or the person you're talking to are experiencing strong emotions.

When we're angry or frustrated, often we want to lash out. When we're sad, we might shut down, and when we're anxious, we might ask someone about the same issue over and over again to try and reassure ourselves.

Communicating in these ways can make us (and others) feel worse, it can also deprive us of support that a kind or empathetic conversation can provide.

So, when facing something as frightening and unknown as a pandemic, effective communication becomes even more important.

1. Reacting vs responding

When facing a difficult situation, we can we can either **react** or **respond** to it.

- **Reacting** is quick, automatic, and driven by emotion.
- **Responding**, on the other hand, is thoughtful, purposeful, and generally calmer.

While most people will instinctively react to a situation when driven by a 'negative' emotion, such as fear, anger or frustration, reacting can be harmful to ourselves and other people. Others are also less likely to listen and respond to us when we react.

For example, imagine that you were trying to buy canned goods at the grocers but they had run out, and as a result, you felt frustrated and worried.

If you **reacted** to this situation by snapping at the cashier, they might become defensive and you could feel embarrassed and awkward about returning to the store.

Alternatively, if you **responded** to this situation by calmly asking the cashier about when their next stock was expected to arrive, you might learn that canned goods should be fully stocked later in the day or tomorrow.

Although neither option 'fixes' the problem (the lack of canned goods right now), by **responding** rather than **reacting**, you gained helpful information and had a pleasant interaction rather than a hurtful one.

How to Respond rather than React

- **Notice** if or when you're experiencing a strong emotion.

- **Label the emotion** and acknowledge its presence, e.g., by saying to yourself "I'm feeling frustrated at the situation right now."

- Make a **note to yourself** of how the other person might be feeling in this situation.

- **Take a slow breath** in and out of your nose before you respond.

- **Express yourself** using calm and respectful language.

It can be hard to follow these steps, especially if you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or in a rush.

If you've only realised that you've reacted after the fact (e.g., if you realised what you said was hurtful or inappropriate), then you can try identifying this and apologising, remembering not to use your apology to excuse harmful behaviour.

For example:

"Sorry Jane, that came across more harshly than I meant it to. I'm worried about this virus, but I shouldn't talk to other people like that."

Next we'll give you some tips for expressing your needs and feelings in **calm, kind, and effective** ways.

2. Expressing your feelings

Expressing your feelings is about letting the other person know how you're feeling and what you're thinking instead of expecting them to "know" or to guess - remember, we are not mind readers!

There are helpful and unhelpful ways of expressing your feelings.

What we might consider 'helpful' or 'appropriate' varies depending on the type of relationship you have with someone. For instance, it's normal to express more emotions with your family than with colleagues or strangers.

Nonetheless, **unhelpful** ways of expressing your feelings generally include:

- Being aggressive, e.g., yelling, using hurtful language, or being sarcastic.
- Shutting down or giving someone the 'cold shoulder'.
- Talking over the top of the other person.
- Talking to the person without listening to their replies.
- Expecting the other person to 'just know' how you feel.
- Making assumptions about the other person - e.g., "you don't care about me."

Alternatively, some helpful tips to express your emotions include:

- Letting the person know that you're **feeling a particular way** and explain why you're feeling that way (if you can) - e.g., "I'm feeling totally drained, just had a long conversation with my manager about what's going to happen with work."

- **Labeling your emotions** if you can - e.g., instead of "I feel like rubbish," try "I feel angry because I don't know what's going to happen, and I'm scared."

- **Taking turns speaking and listening**, so that both you and the other person feel heard. Remember, having a conversation about feelings is not necessarily about trying to fix the problem right then and there, it is more about allowing each other to feel heard and understood instead of bottling emotions up.

- If the other person's behaviour is making you feel a certain way, **use 'I' statements** that explain why you feel that emotion - e.g., instead of "Stop ignoring me, you're so selfish!" try "When you don't respond to my questions, I feel hurt and like I'm not important to you."

- Sometimes, no matter how well you express your feelings, the other person may not respond in the way that you had hoped - that's OK, try to **talk to someone else** who you trust to respond respectfully and helpfully.

- Sometimes, it can be helpful to let the other person know that you simply need to get something off your chest and that you're not expecting them to give you advice or solutions.

- **Being kind** and thanking the other person for listening to you and/or for providing reassurance or solutions (if they did so).

- **Have regular, open conversations** about the way you're feeling with someone you trust, check-in on your friends and loved ones, and remember - there is no right or wrong way to feel about this challenging situation.

Remember, expressing your feelings is about letting others know what's going on for you, and not trying to make them do something. If you're looking for a particular response, you need to clearly express your needs, which is what we'll talk about next.

3. Expressing your needs

A "**need**" is simply something that will help you in some way - it may be something that will help you feel better (e.g., asking for help with house chores so you can have some time to rest - "rest" being your need) or solve the problems you are facing (e.g., asking for advice or assistance with financial hardship - "money" being your need). Expressing your needs is about **asking the other person for something** that will help you in some way.

Clearly communicating your needs (and when your needs aren't being met) helps you and your loved ones – even the people who know us best can't read our minds and we can't expect them to know what to do if we don't explain what we need.

Some helpful tips for expressing your needs include:

- **Know and be aware of your needs**, so that you know when to express them. You can make a list of what you really need to help you cope right now.

- Think about **who might be in the best position to meet your different needs**. Don't expect one person (e.g., your partner) to be able to meet all of them. At times, you might have to meet certain needs on your own.

- **Clearly state what you need** using direct, respectful language. For example, rather than hinting "I'd love to have a bath" try "I'm feeling exhausted and I need to do something relaxing. Could you please watch the baby for 30 minutes tonight so that I can have a bath?"

- **Be aware of when your needs conflict** with someone else's needs, and know when you're willing to compromise (and, when you're not willing to compromise).

- Try to **identify and explain what you need,** rather than what you want someone else to do or not do - e.g., rather than "I just need you to leave me alone" try "I need about 30 minutes of time alone tonight so that I can take it easy."

- Acknowledge that you might not be able to get your needs met straight away, but **make a plan** for when they can be met (e.g., "I need to talk about some stuff that happened today, can we make some time to chat tonight?").

4. Communicating boundaries

Your **"boundaries"** are simply those needs that are essential, important, or **"non-negotiable"**.

Often, if you don't set clear boundaries with others, you might find yourself constantly over-extending yourself and using up more of your resources (your energy, time, money, focus, patience, love, etc.) than you can replenish.

Communicating your boundaries is about **letting others know where you stand** in a calm, clear, kind yet firm way. It includes being assertive in saying "no," declining requests, or re-affirming your needs.

Some helpful tips for communicating your boundaries include:

- **Know and set your boundaries** - you can make a list of the things that you need to cope which are non-negotiable. For example, "Don't take on any new projects until September" or "Have at least 30 minutes to myself each day."

- **Identify who needs to be aware of these boundaries**. Don't expect people to know what you need or to guess what's important to you.

- **Clearly state** what you can and cannot do using **direct, respectful language.**

- Don't be overly apologetic or promise that you'll do something later if you know now it's not something you can take on or commit to.

- If you'd like someone to change what they are doing, **use 'I' statements** to explain to them calmly how you feel and what you'd like them to do differently.

- You could explain the reasons for your boundaries to those close or important to you (e.g., your partner or children) but you don't have to explain your boundaries to everyone. You could simply say "It is something that is very important to me".

- You can **reflect on your values** and what's important to you to help you identify what kinds of boundaries you might need to set right now, and to help you communicate them assertively.

5. Offering support and reassurance

Now that you know what you can do to communicate clearly about what you need, you might be wondering **how you can respond to what others need.**

One of the most powerful ways you can look after those around you is to **give them emotional support when they need or ask for it.**

You don't need to have specialised counselling skills. Just listening to someone shows them that you care, and that they matter to you, which can really help someone cope during a difficult time.

Remember when communicating with someone about how they feel, it's not about giving them advice or helping them solve problems, especially in these highly uncertain times.

Instead, there are two important things that you can offer those around you who are struggling. These are **validation** and **reassurance**.

Validation

All of us want to feel heard and understood. Validation is about helping the other person feel like their emotions and struggles make sense and are understandable given the circumstances.

Validation is, arguably, **one of the most effective ways of supporting another person.**

Validating involves listening to another person and acknowledging how that person's emotions or responses make sense given what's going on for them. For example, things such as "That sounds so frustrating," "I can understand why you'd feel worried about that," or "I totally get why you're feeling exhausted."

Validation isn't the same as agreeing with a person or saying that you'd feel exactly the same in their situation if, in truth, you wouldn't. It is about acknowledging that their emotions are logical, reasonable, and valid for them - that they make sense in the context in which they are felt.

Reassurance

Reassurance is about helping someone ease their doubts and fears. Reassurance can involve:

- Helping the person look at the situation from a different - more realistic, positive, or empowering point of view.
- Reminding them of their strengths, resilience, and resourcefulness.
- Offering to be there for them through the tough times (if you can).

Often we're in a rush to help people feel better, but that can come across like we aren't listening to them. When reassuring someone, try to avoid cheering others up by telling them "look on the bright side," too soon. For example, rather than saying "Well, at least you got to keep your job," you could say "I'm so sorry you had to cancel your conference presentation, I know you've worked so hard on it. Hopefully you get to do it once this thing is over."

If in doubt, imagine what you'd love to hear if it were you in their shoes.

Some other helpful tips for providing emotional support include:

- **Checking in with friends and family** to see how they're feeling, with a phone call, a text or over social media.
- **Focusing on listening** to what the other person is saying and feeling, rather than simply waiting your turn to talk in the conversation.
- **Validating the other person's emotions** (e.g., "That sounds so frustrating!") rather than trying to offer solutions (e.g., "Why don't you just tell your boss you need to work less hours?").
- **Using compassion** rather than criticism (e.g. "You're coping well with how scary this all is" not "Why are you such a worrier!?").
- **Reminding others of their strengths**, using examples of how they coped in the past.
- Assuring them that they're **not in this alone** and that you'll be there for them (if appropriate).

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To access additional tools for coping with stress and anxiety during the corona virus outbreak, please visit our website.

www.thiswayup.org.au/coronavirus

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