



GUIDELINES AND TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH EMOTIONALLY UPSET OR DEMANDING PEOPLE

Assisting upset individuals is both rewarding and demanding. You may be exposed to the intense emotions of others and may not know what to do or say. You may be confronted with questions for which you have no answers. The following are some guidelines for communicating with upset, agitated, or demanding people.

Examples of Sensitive and Helpful Responses:

1. Provide clear information. Discuss sensitively the limits of your authority or ability to respond to the person's needs or request. Define clearly what you can and cannot do. Most people have no idea of what the extent of your function might be.
2. You may ask what the person is feeling or how they are doing. Do not be an "amateur therapist" or give psychological advice, and do not push if they are reluctant to talk about their personal feelings. It is best to let them know you care, and that you are there as a person.
3. It's OK to tell the person that you feel touched or sorry about their pain or situation.
4. If a person in a stressful situation is experiencing confusing emotions, fuzzy memory, difficulty concentrating, or trouble in making decisions; explain that these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation, as long as they don't seriously interfere with the person's functioning.
5. If time allows, avoid interrupting. Be willing to say almost nothing. Let the other person finish thoughts, unless there is real confusion and the details are coming out jumbled.
6. Help people focus on short-term goals. This will help them cope with the immediate reality more effectively. Achievement of manageable goals will contribute to a sense of accomplishment and improved self-esteem.
7. Be willing to accept people for who they are, what they say, how they express their concerns, and how they define their particular losses. Try not to project your own feelings and judgments on them. Each person experiences trauma and its consequences differently. Understand that each person copes and heals in his/her own unique way and at his/her own pace.

8. Be tolerant if people repeat their stories, for many people under stress and in fear do so. It helps them to face their reality in deeper ways. Remember that “time, talk and tears” are important elements of healing.
9. Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know”, or “Let me check.” Do not promise what you cannot deliver. Always get back to people if you say you will.

EXAMPLES OF INSENSITIVE OR UNHELPFUL REMARKS:

1. Claiming that you fully understand the person’s situation.
2. Trying to tell people how they should or should not be feeling, although there may be times when their feelings seem inadequate or inappropriate to you. Many people experiencing major stress criticize themselves and believe their feelings are abnormal by saying: (a) they shouldn’t be feeling the way they feel: (b) they should have gotten over their feelings already: or (c) they should be feeling more or less deeply.
3. Telling people, they are better off than others or comparing their situation to that of others.
4. Brushing aside their feelings abruptly or rudely in order to get to the business at hand, such as filling out their answers on an application.
5. Giving religious explanations for their misfortune.
6. Showing excessive sympathy. This may only make the person feel more hopeless and reinforce feelings of inadequacy.
7. Playing down the crisis or the magnitude of their particular situation.
8. Claiming that a substitute item will replace what has been lost, e.g., pets, furniture, cars, keepsakes, etc.
9. Assuring a person that everything will be OK.
10. Complaining about the government or the “system” rather than giving solid and positive input while acknowledging system-processing requirements.
11. Making false promises.
12. Taking anger personally and/or responding angrily to people.
13. Verbalizing an expectation that people should function normally almost immediately.
14. Making statements that appear intolerant by pre-judging, moralizing, or accusing others.

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