

Crisis Support Solutions

Quick Guide:

Top 5 Back Pocket Skills Every Helper Needs to be Helpful



There is a big difference between *wanting* to be helpful and *actually being* helpful. This guide is designed to help you help those hurting, struggling and wanting support.

#1. Listen.

Active listening isn't just about closing your mouth and opening your ears; it comes from a desire to explore and understand. True listening requires showing up and giving a (care) about the people, places and things involved. It also requires leaning in and listening out for words that tell you what that person is thinking, feeling and planning. True listening requires a compassionate presence, free from judgments, criticisms, distractions or distortions. You know you have achieved "listening" when the person across from you feels heard and understood.

#2. Validate (feelings).

You don't have to agree with someone - or understand their situation - to validate what they are feeling. Validation is merely recognizing and acknowledging. Validation, at its core, says: "I see you're feeling ___." "I hear you're feeling ___." "I acknowledge that you're feeling ___because of ___." Go *next level* by "normalizing" what the person is feeling in response to a difficult situation: "It sounds like you're overwhelmed, which makes sense given all that's on your plate." You know you have achieved "validation" when the person across from you feels seen / heard / recognized / acknowledged and "normal" for feeling what they are feeling given the situation they are in.

#3. Reframe (distortions).

Not every thought you think is fair, accurate, factual or true. Some thoughts are just distorted. Here are examples of a few thought (cognitive) distortions: "I need to make sure everyone's happy with this" (assuming responsibility). "This is all your fault" (assigning blame). "If only I knew __, I could have stopped him" (magical thinking). "They're having problems because of me" (personalizing). "I can't do anything right...and there's nothing I can do to change it" (victim mentality). "Life's not fair" or "the situation is hopeless" (displacing power/control).

Reframing is a "Jedi mind skill" that requires (first) identifying the distortion and (second) offering a more realistic and fair thought to replace it. Example: "It sounds like you're trying to make everyone happy...but, that's not fair to you. People are responsible for their own happiness. I can't control what other people feel, I'm just not that powerful...and neither are you. I think it's fair to spend time and energy concentrating on *your* happiness and accept that people are going to feel how they feel." You know you have achieved "reframing" when the person across from you has a "lightbulb" moment - that is - becomes aware of their own distortion and accepts the reframe as a healthier perspective.

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#4. Explore (options).

Stressful life events can often lead people to feeling “stuck” or “trapped”. As a result, it’s natural to feel increased anxiety, panic, despair and even hopelessness. People who feel stuck, trapped, panicked and hopeless may think the problem is never-ending and there’s zero chance for improvement. In other words, they see no alternatives, choices or options available to them. This, too, is a distortion.

But the helper doesn’t have this “obstructed view”, as it were. Instead, the helper is able to see various options, choices, paths, avenues, etc. that may be available to the person in distress. Therefore, after listening and validating, the helper can explore options. Where there are options, there is hope. Exploring options helps the person see that they are not stuck or trapped. There are several things the person can do - or different ways the person can think - in this situation. Options restore the power of choice and the ability to control the direction of our own life. The key for the helper is to prompt “possibility” - not solve the problem for them. You know you have achieved “exploring options” when the person across from you is able to see various choices available to them and feel empowered to make a decision they believe is right for them.

#5. Follow up (or **refer** to next level care).

Keep showing you give a (care) by following up with the person you helped. Check to see if there’s been any improvement (or new stress) since last you spoke. If more issues have surfaced, then get back in your “back pocket” to listen, validate, reframe and explore. If life has improved some, then celebrate! No matter how small or trivial the improvement may seem, validating success move us towards feeling better. You know you have achieved “follow up” when the person across from you feels good - and may have a few ideas on how to feel even better.

Except, on the occasions, when it feels like no amount of listening, validating, reframing and exploring is helping. When our best attempts at helping doesn’t help, then the best - and most responsible - solution is to refer the person to the “next level” of care. This may mean encouraging the person to contact Employee Assistance (mental health), physician, clergy or trained peer. Sometimes, the best help we can give someone is to encourage them to get the help they need from someone else.

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