

# HOW TO EFFECTIVELY EXPLORE BEHIND THE DISTRESSED DOOR

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# Preface

## Got Skills?

There's a big difference between wanting to be helpful and actually being helpful. I meet people with helping "hearts of gold" that feel they fall short when supporting people in crisis. Wanting to be helpful is important – but it does not ensure that your help will be effective. Being effective – in anything – may include desire (or wanting) but requires knowledge and skills.

Before I delve into the knowledge and skills part, let me first pause here and speak about your desire (or wanting) to be helpful. Being a naturally empathetic and caring person is foundational to this work.

Before you employ your skills, you must first have the desire to move toward someone in distress. I can't teach you to have empathy and feel for someone in pain. I can't teach you to care about another human being. You're naturally loving, caring and empathetic toward people in pain - or you're not. I know someone that would cross 4 lanes of heavy traffic to rescue a stray dog but wouldn't cross a hallway if she heard her coworker crying. As she says it, dealing with people who are upset is just not her "thing".

So, if you're reading this, then I'm guessing that dealing with upset and distressed people is your "thing" - and you have the heart, desire and drive to be helpful and supportive. That's what I mean when I say, it's "foundational". No matter how much you read, learn, practice and implement – it won't matter a bit if you do not have the heart, desire and drive to move toward a soul that's suffering and a person in pain.

Now that we've established the foundation to being an effective helper is to have a helping heart, let's fill your "back-pocket" with

the top 5 skills to keep you being effective. The top 5 skills that we've identified are:

- Exploring
- Validating
- Identifying emotions
- Reframing thoughts
- Creating a plan

In training, we call it “back-pocket” skills, meaning these 5 skills I keep nearby and available to me at all times. With over a decade of experience, I have found that these skills have rarely (if ever) let me down. Understand and master these skills and you are sure to be an effective helper – with those that want to be helped.

Which brings up “disclaimer time”. Please keep in mind that you can only help those that want to be helped. If you are talking with someone that wants to stay stuck, miserable, depressed, angry and so on, then no genie, magic lamp or wand will change it. A few of these back-pocket skills may come close, but at the end of the day, if they're not ready to move forward, then just like the horse to water, no one can make them drink.

## **About Exploring**

Exploring is identified as the first “back-pocket” skill for a reason. Helpers love to help. We are motivated to help. We even get a massive surge of energy when helping. It is because of this excitement and energy that we may get a little too eager, impulsive even. In our desire to be useful and helpful, we may jump in and immediately begin “fixing” to later discover that we missed the mark completely.

Throughout our training we run role-plays (we call it “scenario-based” training). During one small group support exercise, a “distressed” role player mentioned he was having a tough time returning to work. Immediately, the “peer supporter” interrupted and with great excitement exclaimed: “Water! Water! You should drink water. Water helps you stay hydrated!” To which the guy playing the distressed role looked confused and said, “But I’m not thirsty.”

As helpers and supporters, we must be mindful of those in distress. The first priority in helping is exploring and discovering the area (or areas) that is causing the distress. We must explore and discover first. We do this through building rapport, listening, asking questions and furthering the conversation. In this eBook, we will discuss the importance of exploring and then outline when to use this skill, how to use this skill and how you know when you used this skill effectively.

We call this “when, how and how when” approach to skill building. It may sound strange, but it will act as a guide through all 5 back-pocket skill eBooks. You may choose to incorporate this approach in your practice as well.

It’s no secret that Crisis Support Solutions is dedicated to providing the most effective and up-to-date knowledge, skills and abilities a helper can have. Our goal is to put plenty of tools in your helping toolbox. The “trick” is to know which tool to use, when and where to use it and then evaluate the outcome. As you sort through your helper’s toolbox, this when, how and how when approach may serve as a guide for you determine which tool to use, when to use it, how to use it and how to know when it worked.

Before we begin building this skill, I want to extend a personal note of thanks. I am grateful for you in many ways. I am grateful that you have chosen to be a helper – dedicating your life to supporting those in need. Helping people is worthy work and work worth doing. Distressed individuals are susceptible and vulnerable – caring for them should never be taken lightly. I am grateful that you humbly

recognize the power of your helping presence. By investing in resources like these, I am also grateful that you are dedicated to the study and practice of this work. Finally, I am grateful for allowing us to act as your helper! We are proud to stand with you, supporting you as you support others.

Together, Dorie

# What is EXPLORING?

“Exploring is digging and digging in order to discover the core and the crux of an individual’s worry, fear or concern”

Asking someone the right question at the right time is a certainly a skill. But exploring is not just questioning, it’s questioning with a reason. Anybody can ask anyone a question. “Do you have the time?” “What would you like to eat?” “Where have you been all my life?” Exploring is different. Exploring is not random and it’s not just driven by curiosity. Exploring is digging and digging in order to discover the core and the crux of an individual’s worry, fear or concern.

I often explain exploring like digging for buried treasure. Questions act as my “shovel” that helps me dig and dig until I reach the “treasure”. For the helper, the “treasure” is the root or cause of the distress. Only when I have discovered the core of the person’s distress can I effectively address it.



# When do you EXPLORE?

“The time to explore is when you want to discover more about the thoughts and feelings of the individual in distress”

History’s greatest explorers have taught us that the purpose of exploration is discovery. Whether we’re exploring the expanse of the universe, depths of our oceans, new worlds or new medical treatments, explorers are motivated to discover. The same is true with crisis support. Whether I’m sitting with someone screaming, crying or silent, I’m driven to discover what they are thinking, feeling and believing about themselves and their “world”.

The time to explore is when you want to discover more about the thoughts and feelings of the individual in distress. The person in front of you may be sitting there completely silent, staring at his shoes, not making a sound, not even “in the room” and you want to find out what’s going on – what he’s thinking – so you explore by saying: “What are you thinking?” Or, “Where are you right now?” Or, “What keeps going through your mind?”

Instead of the “silent-Joe”, maybe the person is “chatty-Cathy”, manic in their speech – giving you more information than you may even want. Here, the time to explore is when the person says something that peaks your interest or says the same thing more than 2 or 3 times (that’s a clue that it’s important or significant). To slow the rapid-speech and move their thought process to a different direction, you can disrupt by offering an exploring question or statement: “You mentioned [blank] a second ago, tell me more about that...” Or, “You said something about [blank], what does that mean to you?” Or, “I’ve heard you say [blank] a couple of times now, what’s important about that?”

# How to EXPLORE?

“From earliest humans to today, telling the story “of that time when...” or “what happened was...” creates connections between us and helps verify our very existence”

Whether the person is numb and distant or anxious and engaged, the only way to gain “access” to their thoughts and feelings is by having rapport. In our training, we explain that before we can explore, we must build rapport with the person in crisis. Rapport is another skill that every supporter needs in order to be effective – but it’s also one that I’m hoping you brought with you. (If not, it’s still a skill that can be learned or enriched. So we can work on it.) Rapport involves being genuine, open and free from judgments and criticisms – creating a safe space while listening to and recognizing the individual in distress.

Rapport is imperative because it permits the person to tell their story. I say, “tell their story” instead of “recall the events” or some other clinical terminology. Storytelling has been a part of our shared human experience since the beginning of our history. From earliest humans to today, telling the story “of that time when...” or “what happened was...” creates connections between us and helps verify our very existence (more on this when we reach the next skill: validation!).

Although storytelling is a natural expression of our experience, the supporter is listening and gathering information in order to – in turn – provide help. Remember, you’re sitting with someone who has experienced an event so powerful that it has overwhelmed his/her ability to cope. The individual feels lost. She is unsure what happened and uncertain what to do next.

First, introduce yourself and your purpose for being there. Next, consider asking an open-ended question: “What happened this morning?” or a closed-ended question: “Were you there when it happened?” Either way, the goal is to create a safe space for the person to tell their story. But you’re not a reporter or investigator. You have a different reason for wanting to hear their story.

As they are talking – you are listening. You are listening for specific thoughts and feelings. You are mentally noting (not literally noting) any thoughts that are distorted and skewed more toward “fantasy” than reality (ex. “My fault, my fault, the whole thing was my fault”). I’m also watching body language and listening for feelings. The person may be crying, fidgety, rocking back and forth, staring off, looking down, and so on (more on feelings in the section: labeling emotions).

The person may say something that catches my attention – like the sentence above: “My fault, my fault, the whole thing is my fault.” They may (or may not) be to blame – but I want to hear more about what they are thinking, so I ask questions to explore further. The conversation may go something like this:

- [Them] It’s my fault.
- [You] What makes you say that?
- [Them] I promised to get him home safe and I didn’t.
- [You] So, you feel responsible?
- [Them] I do feel responsible.
- [You] Do you think your teammates blame you too?
- [Them] No, it’s just me. Everybody else is saying I did all I could.
- [You] But you think – or feel – you could have done more?
- [Them] I wish I had done more...
- [You] Like what?

And so on...

So let's break that down:

- a) Clearly this conversation should continue (and will continue during the section on "reframing").
- b) Exploring and questioning should sound as conversational as possible. The supporter must choose a style, tone, word choice, etc. that represents compassion and care. In other words, the person in distress should not feel like they being investigated, interrogated, harassed or badgered.

Which leads in to the final point here –

- c) Supporters must not be judgmental or critical when working with someone in distress. I get that judging and criticizing comes with the territory. But I encourage you, beg you even, to leave the judgments and criticisms to someone else and keep your "mission" in mind. Your mission is to be helpful and supportive. Your reason for learning their story is to address the distress and move them toward functioning. The mission of the supporter is to be supportive – most people don't find being judged, criticized, blamed or shamed helpful.

# How do you know when you have EXPLORED effectively?

“Being effective is about discovering the original domino – or in our case – the original “violation” or cause of the disruption”

Around the office, we say: “the thing is not always the thing.” In order to be the most helpful, it’s important to ask exploring questions to discover the “thing.” I find most “newbies” listen for a few minutes then impulsively jump on the first thing they recognize.

“If you’re angry, then you should exercise...it really helps burn out stress toxins!”

And the Helper would be right! Exercise may help exhaust and release stress chemicals and negative energy. But we’re talking about exploring and discovering here. I’m not so interested in the anger as much as what’s driving the anger. I tell my friends all the time, I am never interested in the behavior as much as I’m interested in what motivates the behavior.

Did you ever play with dominoes as a kid? I use to stand them up and put them in a line. I was never patient enough to line up more than 10 or 12, but I’ve seen domino lines snake around corners, go under, up and around objects – all kinds of neat paths. Regardless the configuration, the idea is to push the first one and watch the chain reaction. The first knocks over the second that knocks over the third and so on. When I think of exploring, I think of a line of dominoes. I am interested in that first domino that started the “chain reaction”.

Being effective is about discovering the original domino – or in our case – the original “violation” or cause of the disruption. You might say, “Well that’s easy! The accident (or whatever critical incident) caused the crisis.” That is true. If it weren’t for the incident, there would be no crisis. But remember our mission. If we were investigators or reporters, the incident would monopolize our attention. As crisis supporters, our mission is quite different. Just like I’m not interested in behaviors - I’m interested in motivation for behaviors; I’m not interested in the incident – I’m interested in the “violation” (or disruption) the incident created. The incident is the catalyst – the violation (or disruption) is the crisis.

I met with one lady after a traumatic event. The young lady is a teacher and works with adult learners. One day she noticed one of her students missing. She went to check on him and found him dead in a bathroom. This student was an older man with a known heart condition, but no one (especially her) expected him to have a massive heart attack and die in a bathroom. As you can imagine, the teacher was completely in crisis - overwhelmed by a powerful and unexpected event.

I met her about 45 minutes after she discovered her student. I quickly worked to build rapport then stabilize immediately. I stayed with her the first day for several hours. I didn’t walk away from her until we had a firm plan of action (we’ll cover “plan of action” later on). I called her the next day to follow up. At her request, we met with each other the next day and several days after that. A few weeks went by and she called me saying she was still having trouble sleeping.

In her mind, the dead student had moved from the original spot in the bathroom to the (fear-based) “fantasy” of finding him dead in her office to now finding a dead body in her apartment. I explored... a lot. Her “presenting problem” was trouble sleeping. But I was more interested in what was driving it? What was the first domino?

I explored by asking: was she having trouble getting to sleep, staying

asleep or both? She said both – but mainly getting to sleep. I explored by asking: what happens when she closes her eyes? She said she worried about closing her eyes only to open them and see the body next to her. So the visuals have moved from bathroom to bedroom to bed. In other words, the “body” was getting closer and closer to her.

I kept exploring by asking about feelings. She confirmed panic, fear, worry and dread. At this point, I wondered if the first domino was a violation of safety. With the surprise of finding a dead body in a relatively “safe space” for her – the space was now compromised, no longer safe. During a crisis, the mind tends to run in extremes. If her school space was no longer safe, then maybe her mind ran to believe that her home space was no longer safe.

I explored my theory of a violation of safety. She said maybe, but no “ah-ha” realization. So clearly safety wasn’t her first domino. I explored everything I heard and could think of. My proverbial shovel wasn’t hitting the treasure. I was coming up short. I admitted it to the teacher too – almost ready to apologize and make a referral to another helper (which would have been entirely responsible). Before I did that, I wanted to explore one more idea. I mentioned to the young lady my idea that critical incidents violate our deeply held belief systems (like safety, trust and control). I said that I was going to list typical violations and let me know if any one word resonated with her. I began my list. Safety? She didn’t say anything. Trust? No response. Control? Nothing. Fairness? She looked up at me and nodded in affirmation. She repeated, fairness. “Yes – that’s it. Not fair! Not fair!” She began crying, the type of relief and release crying that includes a bit of laughter. “Why me?” she asked repeatedly. “Why did it have to be me?? Not fair. So not fair!” Ladies and gentlemen, we have our first domino. The shovel has landed firmly on the treasure. Fairness - I did not see that coming!

Exploring moves us to discover the “thing”. The question that began this section was: How do you know when you have effectively

explored? The answer - when you see that person reach an “ah-ha” or “oh wow” moment of understanding and insight. With questioning comes discovery; with discovery comes revelation. It is imperative for the individual to understand the “first domino” – the original violation and disruption. When understanding and insight is gained, then the person is able to move forward.



# In Closing

“We listen, question and explore in order to discover. We discover so that we might efficiently and effectively address the needs, worries and concerns of those we support”

A few points I wish I would have known when first starting out:

The practice of exploring can lead to amazing discovery and insight – or can be incredibly annoying and frustrating. Here are a couple of things I’ve (unfortunately) learned the hard way:

There will come a time that you will explore and the only response you will get in return is: “I don’t know!” You may try a different exploring approach and you still hear: “I don’t know!” This can be frustrating for both the person in distress and the Helper. Please don’t get disheartened. Their mind may not be ready to “go there” – and it may be a blessing in disguise for you if it doesn’t (given that you might not be ready for what’s behind that “door”). So just pivot and move from exploring to planning.

What is the person’s plan for the next few minutes, hours and days? What will be helpful to them and healthy for them? During this time, continue to build rapport and meet needs. You may find – in time – the person feels more stable in their “world” and more comfortable with you and another opportunity may present to explore further.

I just mentioned the idea of opening a “door”. In this eBook, I’ve likened exploring to digging for buried treasure, discovering the first domino and now opening a door. In training, we warn Helpers continuously: Never open a door you’re not ready to walk through! There is a great line in the movie Jurassic Park: “Just because we

could, no one ever stopped to question if we should.” Just because you can explore – does that mean you explore? If you don’t have the knowledge, skill and ability to help that person, then the answer to that question is: No! You shouldn’t!

Remember, we don’t ask exploring questions because we’re curious – we ask because the next move in our playbook is to address the violation or cause of the distress. If you don’t know how to address the distress, then there is no need to explore further. Having said that, referring the person to someone that can address is not only helpful – but also responsible!

## Recap and Conclusion

I hope you found the when, how and how when approach helpful in learning the exploring skill. Let’s recap that quickly:

Q: When to explore?

A: The time to explore is when you want to know more!

Q: How to explore?

A: You can explore through asking questions or making furthering statements. The key is to watch and listen for thoughts and feelings that may be generating distress, then question or further to discover the crux or core violation.

Q: How will you know when you’ve explored effectively?

A: The purpose of exploring is to discover the violation/disruption created by the incident. Only after you discover the source of the disruption can the individual and helper recover, restore or redeem that which seemed lost.

The exploring skill is vital to the helping process, but notice, the helping process does not end here. Let's say that (as a result of a critical incident) you discovered someone felt their personal safety violated and – as a result – no longer feel safe within themselves and within their world. The helping process does not end here. It would never be okay for the helper to say, “Wow! Glad we figured that out. Good luck!”

We listen, question and explore in order to discover. We discover so that we might efficiently and effectively address the needs, worries and concerns of those we support.

While the information is still fresh, practice exploring! People don't have to be in crisis for you to use this skill. My friends catch me “exploring” them all the time (god bless them, they're so patient!). During the next conversation you have with a coworker, family member or friend – practice furthering and questioning. Notice that the “thing” is really not the thing. If / when that's the case, then explore further. As you explore, you may find that someone is actually irritated because an agreement was violated or they feel they were treated unfairly.

Whether helping someone in crisis or trying to understand your teenager, coworker, or aging parent, exploring is a handy skill to have. Now it's your turn to take what you've learned here and apply for all in need.

We encourage you to keep on learning! There are more skills and plenty of room to fill your proverbial “back pocket”. Be sure to check out the next skill in the series: Validation. Here's the teaser – anything can be validated and almost all communication is an attempt for validation!

You want to build rapport within minutes and deepen your partnerships? This is done through validation. As you will read, this is the easiest skill to learn and one of the most under-utilized skills implemented. Validation is not rocket science. I've used it with an 8 month old and an 80 year old. I tell participants in training, if you

don't do anything else, at the very least you can validate. I am so excited to share this next skill with you.

Until then, keep exploring! Keep discovering!

As I say during graduation, this is not the end of our relationship – we are just beginning our conversation! We are grateful for you and look forward hearing from you and continuing our relationship.

[INSERT SOCIAL MEDIA]

Thank you again!

Be well and be blessed!