

# How to Listen to Someone Who Is Hurting

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Whenever people face bereavement, injury or other kinds of trauma, they need to talk about it in order to heal. To talk, they need willing listeners.

Unfortunately, many of us shrink from listening to people in pain. We may feel like we have enough troubles of our own, or be afraid of making matters worse by saying the wrong thing.

Sometimes we excuse ourselves by assuming that listening to people who are hurting is strictly a matter for professionals such as psychotherapists or members of the clergy. It is true that professional people can help in special ways, and provide the individual with insights that most of us aren't able to offer. However, their assistance, although valuable, is no substitute for the caring interest of supervisors, co-workers, friends and others from the person's normal daily life.

It is natural to feel reluctant or even afraid of facing another person's painful feelings. But it is important not to let this fear prevent us from doing what we can to help someone who is suffering.

## **General guidelines**

Though each situation is unique, some guidelines can help make the process easier:

- The most important thing to do is simply to be there and listen and show you care.
- Find a private setting where you won't be overheard or interrupted. Arrange things so that there are no large objects, such as a desk, between you and the person.
- Keep your comments brief and simple so that you don't get the person off track.
- Ask questions that show your interest and encourage the person to keep talking, for example:
  - "What happened next?"
  - "What was that like?"
- Give verbal and non-verbal messages of caring and support. Facial expressions and body posture go a long way toward showing your interest. Don't hesitate to interject your own feelings as appropriate, for example:
  - "How terrible."
  - "I'm so sorry."
- Let people know that it's OK to cry. Some people are embarrassed if they cry in front of others. Handing over a box of tissues in a matter-of-fact way can help show that tears are normal and appropriate. It's also OK if you get a bit teary yourself.
- Don't be distressed by differences in the way people respond. One person may react very calmly, while another expresses strong feelings. One person may have an

immediate emotional response; another may be "numb" at first and respond emotionally later. Emotions are rarely simple; people who are suffering loss often feel anger along with grief. Unless you see signs of actual danger, simply accept the feelings as that person's natural response at the moment. If a person usually is rational and sensible, those qualities will return once their painful feelings are expressed.

- Don't offer unsolicited advice. People usually will ask for advice later if they need it; initially it just gets in the way of talking things out.
- Don't turn the conversation into a forum for your own experiences. If you have had a similar experience, you may want to mention that briefly when the moment seems right. But do not say, "I know exactly how you feel," because everybody is different.

### **What not to say**

It's natural to worry about saying the "wrong thing." The following is a brief but helpful list of three other things not to say to someone who is suffering:

- Anything critical of the person:
  - "You shouldn't take it so hard."
  - "You're overreacting."
- Anything that tries to minimize the person's pain:
  - "It could be a lot worse."
  - "You're young; you'll get over it."
- Anything that asks the person to disguise or reject his feelings:
  - "You have to pull yourself together."
  - "You need to be strong for your children's sake."

These are helpful guidelines, but the most important thing is to be there and listen in a caring way. People will understand if you say something awkward in a difficult situation.

### **Offer simple help**

Once you have finished talking, it may be appropriate to offer simple forms of help.

Check about basic things like eating and sleeping. Sharing a meal may help the person find an appetite. Giving a ride to someone too upset to drive may mean a lot. Ask what else you can do to be of assistance.

### **Take care of yourself**

After you have talked to someone who is hurting, you may feel as if you have absorbed some of that person's pain. Take care of yourself by talking to a friend, taking a walk or doing whatever helps restore your own spirits. Congratulate yourself on having had the courage to help someone in need when it wasn't easy.

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