

## Communicating with Emotionally Distressed Individuals

### Listening, Reflecting, Connecting and Caring

One of the greatest resources for dealing with emotional pain is feeling and believing that other people care about you and are there to support you. Therefore we want to help people in emotional distress feel like we understand them and care about them.

Given how important it is to communicate effectively with people in emotional distress the following can enhance our communication skills so that we can more effectively express to individuals that we are listening to them and understand what they are saying to us.

**Listen, listen, and listen:** Emotionally distressed individuals are carrying an emotional burden and have a need to lighten their load. Your role is to help them emotionally wind down so that you can eventually help them identify and choose next steps/options for support.

**Ventilate Feelings:** You do this by allowing the distressed person to vent; you listen and ask questions, more venting, more listening, more questions, more venting. EG; "tell me more", how did that make you feel?", "what happened next?"

**Paraphrasing/Reflection:** Restate to individuals what you are hearing from them. "You are saying...". This also encourages the person in distress to continue talking and communicates that you understand what that person is saying. Your reflections express acceptance and concern without being judgmental. However be cautious of stating back the exact words/content that has just been stated by the individual. Attempt to emotionally paraphrase what is being expressed by the individual.

**Empathetic and non-judgmental responses:** Offering empathy and compassion while avoiding rational arguments and quick solutions.

**Normalize feelings of the distressed person:** Not necessarily the event or the behavior however. EG: "I can see how you might feel so upset hearing such news from your boyfriend".

**Explore Options:** Only after the individual has released their emotional burden (vented) can you begin to explore next steps. Helpful questions might include; "what do you need most right now? "what would you like to happen now?", "how could we get that to happen?", "what would happen if...(suggestions)?"

**Select action/option:** Important to provide ongoing support and follow-up for individual during action phase. Walk the person over to the Counseling Center, support the person to make phone calls if needed. Set a time for check in with the person to see how she/he is doing.

**Self Care:** Seek out emotional support for self to debrief from particularly difficult emotional encounters. Ask for time from your HDs/AHDs/other RA/RM/GRMs **AND** come to the **CSC Res. Life Consultation Group this Fall.**