

# HELPING FAMILIES IN DISTRESS

Cooperative Extension Service \* University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign \* Disaster Resource

## Begin With Listening

Effective helping begins with good listening. Good listening means really understanding what the other person is saying to you.

### Barriers to Good Listening

- *Listening with “half an ear” or tuning out.* You must tune in and pay attention to the person talking. If you aren't paying attention to the speaker, you're missing information
- *Acting as the judge and jury.* You can't be involved in judging and still hear the whole story. Withhold judgmental statements.
- *Turning off ideas you don't agree with.* When your mind slams shut, your ears do, too.
- *Jumping to conclusions.* Listening involves entering into the other person's frame of reference, not being caught up in your own assumptions.

### Listen to Help: Active Listening

Active listening is an understanding response which encourages the other person to talk or continue talking. It helps you establish a helping relationship, gain information and understand what the other person is experiencing. It fosters a trusting relationship. Active listening helps the other person to feel accepted and understood.

Here are several ways to demonstrate that you are actively listening:

- *Acknowledging what the speaker says by saying “Mm Hm” or nodding.* These simple responses say “I'm hearing you.”
- *Making eye contact.* Look the speaker in the eye. Focus your attention on this person without trying to do some other activity while listening. True, you may be able to do a task and hear what is said, but the speaker *will feel* unimportant, not heard, and discouraged.

- *Leaning forward.* This body gesture says “I'm interested.”
- *Using Silence.* Silence can be a powerful way to communicate acceptance and encouragement. It can say “You are important to me. I'm willing to wait as you gather your thoughts. I can let you say what you're thinking in your own way.” You communicate impatience when you interrupt, do too much prodding or finish others' sentences when they falter. That's a sure way to hinder a relationship.
- *Questioning.* Ask a question that cannot be answered by “yes” or “no” to get more information or help the speaker begin sharing with you. Use questions sparingly.

Example: “What happened when you tried to fill out the loan restructuring forms?”

- *Paraphrasing.* Without interrupting, restate what has been said in your own words. If you have misunderstood, the speaker can give more correct information. For example:

Speaker: “My adult children tell me I should sell out now and move in with them. They say they'll take care of everything.”

Listener: “Your children want to take care of you now.”

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For more information contact your local Extension office:



Disaster Resources Web site:  
<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster>

- *Reflect feelings.* Without interrupting, respond to or give a name to the feelings you hear in what the other person says or does. This not only furthers the conversation, but gives you and the speaker insight into emotional issues that might be hiding behind words. Example:

Speaker: "My adult children tell me I should sell out now and move in with them. They say they'll take care of everything."

Listener: "You're not sure you want to do that." Or, "Does that feel scary (or like giving up)?"

### Beyond Listening

As you listen and learn more about the speaker's situation, you may want to help. A good place to begin is by offering *supportive statements*. Respond to the speaker with a touch or a comment that offers encouragement or acceptance of the speaker's thoughts, ideas and feelings.

For example, the speaker may confide "I feel like I'm going to drown in all this debt!" Your reply can help the person feel that he or she is not alone: "I certainly understand why you feel that way. I think it's normal."

Occasionally, you may need to confront the speaker with the contradiction you see between words and behavior. *Interpreting the situation* can help him or her face unexpressed feelings.

For example, the speaker may be telling you how pleased she is that her situation is working out a particular way. But all the while, you notice how she looks sad and dejected. Your reply of "You're telling me how happy you are, but you look pretty upset" can open doors of insight for the other person that can lead to healing the hurts. It can also give you an opportunity to hear what the real issues are.

Guide the speaker in *determining what the actual problems are*. He or she may feel like a spouse or another person is the problem. Is the problem really the person or the person's behavior? Maybe even circumstances? When we blame a person for our difficulties, we are effectively tearing down a relationship without solving the problem. Help the speaker focus on the source of the difficulties.

Guide him or her in *considering courses of action* or resources for help. Often the problem can't be solved by you or the person you're helping. If so, it is best to refer the person to a person or group who can offer more specific assistance. This may be professional help (legal, financial, emotional, spiritual) or a support group or supportive person.

### When You're In Over Your Head

*Here's when to refer a person to a professional or supportive group or agency:*

1. when you feel persistently uncomfortable;
2. when you believe that improvement is "impossible" or the situation is "hopeless;"
3. when the person says, "nothing is helping" or what you provide the person isn't helping;
4. there is obvious or unusual changes in speech, appearance, or behavior, including memory confusion or hallucinations or delusions;
5. the person continues to be so emotional he or she can't communicate;
6. there is ongoing deterioration of life (social and physical);
7. all the person discusses are physical complaints;
8. substance abuse;
9. threats of self harm or harm to others;
10. aggression and abuse (verbal and physical);
11. if the situation seems horrible or unbearable; and most importantly;
14. if you're unsure, then refer!

*This information was developed by the Cooperative Extension Service, Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. Reviewed and revised by Aaron Ebata, Extension Specialist, University of Illinois. January, 1995*

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