

RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY TO A PERSON IN DISTRESS

Dr. Mike Condra, Ph.D., C.Psych



For many people in human service work, interacting with individuals who are distressed, fearful, angry or agitated may be a frequent part of the job. The following suggestions will assist you in responding to someone who is in a distressed state and help to defuse the situation.

Some things **TO DO...**

- Talk to the person when you are calm and have time to listen and support
- Reach out - show you are concerned
- Remember that the person is likely uncomfortable and may feel awkward and embarrassed
- Talk about things that you have observed (for example, changes in the person's behaviour)
- Listen actively, without passing judgment
- Reassure and support (e.g. "I want to help")
- Be patient
- Provide information about other supports, resources and encourage their use
- Be honest and kind
- Recognize that you can provide support, but that you can't control whether or not the person accepts this
- Try to make it comfortable for them to talk to you again
- Give advice when you are asked to do so, although it may be ignored
- Continue to suggest professional help
- If they are frightened to see a professional - provide reassurance
- Remember that the act of reaching out to a person in distress is a good thing
- Seek advice from your resources
- Debrief (talk to a trusted and supportive person afterwards)

Some things **NOT TO DO...**

- Assume that the behaviour you have observed is due to a mental illness
- Use medical or psychiatric terminology
- Hope for a psychological breakthrough
- Force the person to talk
- Assume the role of a professional caregiver/counsellor
- Nag, plead, beg, bribe, threaten or manipulate
- Get into a power struggle - you will lose
- Criticize or shame - these tactics are cruel and the person will withdraw
- Pry - remember to respect their privacy
- Try to control them - they will withdraw and ultimately outwit you
- Expect the person to follow your advice even if they've asked for it
- Overestimate what you can accomplish
- Ignore your own feelings



Dr. Mike Condra, Ph.D., C.Psych, provides training and consultation on mental health awareness, stigma-reduction, dealing effectively with people in distress, verbal de-escalation, assessment of suicide risk, threat and crisis-Intervention.

