

Helping People Feel Heard and Accepted

Many people want to help those around them emotionally, but struggle knowing how to do so. The following steps will allow you to provide authentic emotional validation.

The most important part of this process is the attitude that you bring to it. Try your best to set your assumptions aside and become as curious as you can! Ask questions and then ask more questions. Make sure to come from a place of compassion for the other person.

Remember that this process is actually rather difficult and takes time to learn. Self-compassion is necessary!

1. Allow the other person to tell their side of the story, without interrupting. Even if something is skewed, do not try to change their mind or help them see it another way. Simply listen.
2. Ask follow up questions about their story, narrative or feelings. Get curious and remove assumptions!
For example if the person said “I felt very sad” do not assume that their definition of sad is the same as yours. Ask them “What does it mean to you when you say that you felt sad?”
3. Once their narrative is complete, ask them how they were feeling through the event. They may have already stated this; it’s okay to ask them again! Or, you can simply say “you said you were feeling very _____. Would you like to tell me more about that?”
4. Repeat back to the person a summary of what they have said, whether you agree with it or not. Do not try to help them see things differently. Simply recount what they have said. Then, repeat their feelings back to them. Finish by asking if you heard them properly. Then, allow them as much time as they would like to respond to your comment. Listen from a place of compassion and non-judgment.

Here’s an example:

Timmy, you said that you were at the store buying apples when a young man laughed at the way you looked. You told me this caused you to have a lot of thoughts and you remembered the time a similar event happened when you were younger. If I heard you properly, this made you feel really lonely and embarrassed. Do I have that right?

Notice how I finished by checking in with Timmy? I set my assumptions aside and asked him to confirm that. This is a really important step to making someone feel heard and accepted.

5. Next, take a moment to imagine how you would have felt if you were in that situation. Then, share that with the person. Be sure to imagine how you would feel if the situation happened exactly as they state it happened (whether you believe that to be the case or not). Then, allow the person as much time as they need to respond to your comment. It is very likely that the person may disagree with the way you felt and state that they did not feel this way. That’s fine!! It still shows them that you are listening and trying to understand them. It also may help them hone in more specifically on how they feel.

Example:

Timmy, that must have been really difficult for you. I imagine if I were in that situation, I may have felt very rejected and alone.

6. Acknowledge that the person's feelings are completely reasonable (which from their perspective, they are!).

Example:

Wow, Timmy, that's quite the situation, I completely understand why you're feeling lonely and embarrassed.

7. Convey empathy and remorse for the person's emotional state.

Example:

Timmy, I'm very sorry to hear this happened to you and that it's left you feeling lonely and embarrassed.

8. As applicable, ask if they would like your support. Be sure that you are not pushing yourself too far and leading yourself to burn out. Where possible (this will depend on the person's cognitive abilities and their emotional state), allow the person to tell you how they would like to help you, rather than offering a suggestion of how you can help them.

Example:

It sounds like you are dealing with a lot of emotions right now. Is there any way that I can help you or offer support?