

TALKING TO PEOPLE IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

From Greg Young, M.Div., Chaplain

Listen. Just listen.

Don't underestimate the power of your presence. Most people are given assurance that you are there for them and truly care simply by your presence.

Remember, when we are stressed a couple of things generally happen to the human voice....we talk in a higher pitch and we tend to speak more rapidly

Take some deep breaths... then take some more....

My mantra in talking to people in crisis is "Slow it down and soften it up". Soften your voice in talking to distressed people and slow down what you say and be prepared to repeat what you say.

Most people just need to vent. Because the pre-frontal cortex part of the brain is "hijacked" when a person is in crisis, reasoning with them is extremely difficult, so ride it out with them.

Here are some things to consider when talking to someone who is really upset.

People who are upset, often just want to unload and will not listen, so you just have to weather the storm of their unloading.

You are not the enemy. People who are very upset sometimes look for someone to blame. I will say it again...you are not the enemy.

Rumors run rampant during times of crisis and some of what people share comes from distorted misinformation. Social Media, while good for some things is riddled with misinformation intended to inflame and divide people. Given that it is so easy to post and respond on social media, there are a lot of knee jerk responses which only furthers anxiety and fear. None of us have all the answers and try to answer what questions you can as honestly as you can.

Be self-aware of what is going on inside of you. As much as I would never wish this upon my friends who are first responders, the stress will ramp up for you, and it is incumbent for you to find ways to play, to share your frustration with those of us who are there for you. You will see addition ways in which people may act out in panic. But also be on the lookout for people and organizations that are doing good things, doing their parts in efforts to help. It is so easy in your job to lose perspective and become cynical, but as you know, there are good people out there.

TACTICS FOR TALKING TO SOMEONE IN CRISIS

Those who have had training with me know that I talk about the "Diamond Structure of Crisis Communication".

Basically it means to start with questions that only require a simple response or short answer. This helps people to focus. Then you move to the open ended questions, such as the "How, When,

Where, What, and “Why” to get them to elaborate. When asking the “why” question we need to be careful not to make it feel confrontational. I will sometimes ask the “why” question like this: “Can you help me understand what you were thinking when you did so and so?”

Your goal is to then wrap up the conversation by summarizing what you heard them say and reverting back to the questions requiring “yes” or “no” responses .

Mirroring techniques: don’t overuse these as the person in distress will think you are a “parrot”.

Restatement. You simply re-state a word or couple of words of what the distressed person shares with you

Summary Paraphrase. You summarize what you hear them telling you. i.e. “What I hear you saying is.....”

Extrapolation paraphrase. You summarize what you hear them telling you, and if they are thinking of doing something reckless, you add a consequence. Here’s an example:

The distressed person says: “I am so overwhelmed right now. I have lost everything and life is over for me, I am thinking of ending it all”

Response: “So in other words, you are so upset right now that you want to kill yourself and cause great pain to your family and friends who love you that they will struggle with for the rest of their lives”.

Reflection of Emotion:

Here you are seeking to capture and reflect back the emotional state the distressed person is feeling.

Example: “During this pandemic, I am so isolated and alone and have no one to talk to” Possible response: “that sounds lonely”

NOTE: these tools and techniques are a way of conveying empathy and tells the distressed person that you do care.