


Communication Skills
for Supporting Others
in Managing Stress

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from Brene Brown
on Empathy

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OVS
TRANSITION FORWARD
Webinar Series

July 29, 2020 – Evaluating Performance

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AGENDA

- 1) Responding vs. Reacting
- 2) Communicating to Support Others
- 3) Communicating to Solve Problems

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Responding versus Reacting: Communicating from the **Green Zone**

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The Smoke Alarm & The Watchtower

- ➡ First, the emotional brain (the smoke alarm) detects a potential threat (i.e. a stressor)
- ➡ Next, the rational brain (the watchtower) examines the potential threat, decides on a plan of action, and activates that plan
- ➡ Then, the emotional brain (the smoke alarm) returns to baseline and continues monitoring

(Van der Kolk, 2015)

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In Daily Life

Managing stress relies on a healthy balance between the emotional and rational parts of the brain.



In Times of Extreme or Traumatic Stress

- ➡ The smoke alarm is constantly going off - suggesting danger; it gets stuck in the 'on' position.
- ➡ The brain becomes out of balance; the watchtower is overwhelmed by the smoke alarm.
- ➡ All the brain's attention gets focused on trying to shut off the smoke alarm, at the expense of other brain functions.

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Resilience = Being able to stay in, or quickly return to, a place of physiological, emotional, and mental balance after being disrupted.

It is maintaining the ability to **respond** vs. **react** to difficult situations



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Responding vs. Reacting

Responding = Green Zone

- Emotional and rational brain are in balance
- Body is in its resting state
- Restoring & refueling
- Acting from a sense of perceived safety

Reacting = Red Zone

- Brain is in 'fight or flight' mode
- Body's immune, cardiovascular, hormonal, and digestive systems are disturbed
- Acting from a sense of perceived deficit and disturbance

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Communicating to Support Others

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When people are struggling they benefit from the opportunity to...

... express themselves.

... feel heard and understood.

... have their experiences, thoughts and feelings validated.

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When people are struggling they **may not** benefit from...

... having their experiences compared to others, minimized, or dismissed.

... being encouraged to stop feeling what they are feeling.

... advice (or having their problem fixed for them).

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Empathy



Understanding or feeling what another person is experiencing **from within their frame of reference**

Sympathy



Feeling compassion, sorrow, or pity for the hardships that another person encounters

*from Brene Brown
on Empathy*

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Empathy can be expressed through reflecting what you hear the person saying:

- *Experiences*
- *Thoughts*
- *Feelings*

You are saying...
It sounds like...
So you really...
Let me see if I have this right...

If you get it wrong, apologize and ask the person to clarify their point.
(Getting it wrong is not bad!)

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Expressing Empathy

These phrases should be avoided:

- "Don't feel bad."
- "Don't cry."
- "Try not to think about it."
- "Let's talk about something else."
- "I know how you feel."
- "It's God's will."
- "It could be worse."
- "At least you still have...."
- "At least [anything]."

They are well-intended, but are experienced as dismissive or invalidating.

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Remember...
Some questions
are unanswerable.

*"Don't do something – just
stand there."*

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Communicating to Solve Problems

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*Behavior change
by itself is
unacceptable to
people in
distress...*



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Sharing Experiences

'How this has landed on me'

- I feel bad when X happens
- I am...
- Personal, subjective
- Focus on process, relationship
- You are the expert on your own experience

Solving Problems

'What we ought to do about it'

- It is bad when X happens
- We can...
- Impersonal, objective
- Focus on outcomes, solutions
- Room for disagreement about facts, plans, etc.

Adapted from Hanson, R. (2018)

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- Both are necessary. We usually weave them together.
- *Problem talk* can easily slide into arguments.
- *Experience talk* is often safer.
- It becomes challenging if you are not dancing the same dance.
- If problem talk is getting tense, try switching back to experience talk
- Start by joining.



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Entering the dialogue safely

Establishing mutual purpose

- Recognize one
- Invent one
- What do I want for me?
- What do I want for others?
- What do I want from this relationship?
- Do others believe I care about their goals on this conversation?
- Do they trust my motives?
- Watch for:
 - Defensiveness
 - Debate
 - Circular conversations

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*Remaining in the
dialogue safely*
Mutual Respect

- Do others believe I respect them?
- Watch for escalating emotions as signs of violated safety
- Instead of getting hooked and fighting back, break the cycle
 - Step out of the content
 - Rebuild safety
 - Reengage

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Dealing with Anger

- People may express their distress by getting mad at a number of targets – both rational and irrational (including you)
- Do your best not to take it personally!
- Often people just need to feel heard, and to vent
- Validating their feelings and concerns without getting angry or defensive can go a long way (but is easier said than done)



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Dealing with Anger

- High emotionality is contagious
- Try to avoid getting hooked
- Consider anger as a sign of a lack of safety
 - What do you need to get the other person (and/or you) back in the green zone?
- Anger is a surface level emotion
- Try to connect/empathize with the emotion underneath the anger



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A Few Other Tips

- **Try making clear agreements**
 - Specific and concrete
 - What would it look like if the agreement were kept?
- **Avoid leading with "you..."**
 - Try lead with "I..."
- **Avoid saying 'but'**
 - Try "yes, and at the same time..."
- **Avoid asking "why"**
 - Try using "what" instead

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and finally,
remember...

**Staying
Empathically
Engaged
Requires
Self-Care**

- ☐ Only genuine empathy is helpful
- ☐ Remaining genuine with many stressed-out clients, staff, or colleagues requires self-care
- ☐ Know your limits so you can stay genuinely engaged

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**Q
&
A**

Thank you!

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