

Tips on talking to someone in crisis during COVID-19



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The current COVID-19 pandemic is a source of anxiety for people across the country and your colleagues, friends or family may reach out to you for support. **How should you respond?** Use our active listening tips to navigate these sensitive conversations with more confidence.

DO

1. Tell them you're there to listen and help them find the next step.

EXAMPLE

"I'm here to listen and I really want to help you. I'm not a trained counsellor or doctor, but I'll do my best to put you on the right path."

2. Practice empathy by considering the needs of people different than yourself, especially those in vulnerable populations.
3. Pause to reflect on what the caller has told you and share back your understanding, showing the caller they've been heard.
4. Mirror back what you're hearing in your own words rather than parroting what they've told you.

EXAMPLE

"I just lost my job and I don't know what to do. I have small kids and I don't know if I'll be able to get food on the table. I have no idea if I even qualify for EI."

Helpful answer (mirroring): *"I'm hearing you say that you're feeling very overwhelmed with all the uncertainty, and not knowing how to apply for EI is even more frustrating."*

Unhelpful answer (parroting): *"I'm hearing you say that you're worried about going hungry."*

5. Validate the caller's feelings and concerns.

EXAMPLE

"I'm worried about my son, who lives with a mental illness and doesn't have secure housing. What if he catches this virus?"

Helpful answer: *"I can tell that you care about your son very much. It can be hard not to run through the worst-case scenarios."*

Unhelpful answer: *"Everyone feels stressed right now. I have two elderly parents, and they have trouble even using a cellphone."*

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6. Ask if it's OK to connect the person with other helpful resources, e.g., food bank, public health, employment insurance information.
7. Provide specific websites and phone numbers.
8. Make sure the resources you're directing people to are currently available.
9. When possible, connect the person directly to the resource.

DON'T

1. Give advice or attempt to solve the problem.
2. Presume you know what the person is thinking or how they are feeling.
3. Try to relate by sharing your own experience. That will minimize the caller's suffering.
4. Ask leading or "why" questions.

EXAMPLE

"I'm exhausted and I can't fall asleep at night. I'm working full time, my kids are at home, and my parents are elderly. I don't know how long I can keep doing this."

Helpful answer (open ended): *"That does sound exhausting. I'm wondering what was most helpful for you in the past when you've been exhausted and overwhelmed?"*

Unhelpful answer (why): *"Why do you think you can't sleep?"*

Unhelpful answer (leading): *"When you can't sleep, have you tried this cool meditation app?"*

5. Provide resources you aren't sure are relevant or credible.
6. Accept hostility, threats, or abusive language. Calmly ask them to call back when they are ready to speak respectfully.

Other considerations

1. If you feel that the caller is experiencing a mental health emergency or there is an imminent risk of suicide, direct them to a local distress centre or call 911.
2. If you are feeling distressed following a challenging call, reach out and seek help when you need it. Remember, to be an effective support for others, you must first take care of yourself.