

• **How You Can Help** • **A TOOLKIT FOR FAMILIES** •



COMMUNICATION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

MODULE 3

Module 3: Communication and Problem-Solving Skills

When a family member suffers from a mental illness, one of the most important things to do is to take the time to learn about the disorder. By educating yourself as much as you can about the mental or substance use disorder, you can take an active role in your family member's recovery. The Family Toolkit was designed to assist families in caring for a family member with a mental illness by providing information and practical resources. The toolkit consists of five learning modules. Module 3 provides practical skill training in effective communication and problem-solving. The other four modules in the Family Toolkit are:

Module 1: *Understanding Mental and Substance Use Disorders*

Module 2: *Supporting Recovery from a Mental or Substance Use Disorder*

Module 4: *Caring for Yourself and Other Family Members*

Module 5: *Children and Youth in the School System*

For more information on the Family Toolkit and how it can be used please read the "Introduction to Family Toolkit" available from BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information by calling 1-800-661-2121 or our website www.heretohelp.bc.ca. Families are also encouraged to seek out books, articles, videos, and organizations who can further assist them in learning more about the specific disorder(s) that affect their family member.

About Us

Seven provincial mental health and addictions agencies are working together in a collective known as the **BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information**. We represent the Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, Awareness and Networking around Disordered Eating, British Columbia Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health Care, and the Mood Disorders Association of BC. Our reason for coming together is that we recognize that a number of groups need to have access to accurate, standard and timely information on mental health, mental disorders and addictions, including information on evidence-based services, supports and self-management.

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MODULE 3

Communication and Problem-Solving Skills

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Introduction

Communication is one of the most frequent activities we engage in on a day-to-day basis. It has been suggested that 75% of our waking time is spent communicating. How often have all of us probably felt at one time or another that we were not as effective as we would have liked in our communications with others? Success in communicating depends on the communication choices we make and awareness about the factors that can influence how messages are delivered and reacted to by others. The more you know about communication, the better your chances of communicating effectively. Practice is essential.

You may find that as you read through this section, you are already doing the kinds of communication discussed in this section. If so, you can rest assured you are on the right track.

These communication techniques are useful for everyone in the family including the person with the illness. Good communication enhances relationships between the person with the illness, their health care providers, and their family. Mental and substance use disorders can create additional challenges, especially when the disorder affects a person's ability to think clearly or concentrate. Even at the best of times, it can be difficult to talk about sensitive topics. Sometimes communicating with a family member who has mental illness can be one of the hardest things we do. This is because, as family members, we bring a range of expectations and emotions to dealing with the illness.

The goal of this section is to provide families with the skills they need to discuss their thoughts, feelings, needs and problems constructively and successfully. This will help to ensure that issues are discussed and that action is taken to resolve problems.

Good communication can help:

- Express concerns and worries you may have about your family member in a non-threatening way
- Reduce the risk of relapse by creating a positive environment at home
- Enhance communication with professionals involved in your family member's care in the resolution of problems
- To clarify what each member of the family can do to help facilitate recovery

Communication should always include consideration of whether we are responding with the appropriate sensitivity to the well-being of the person who is receiving our message.



Elements of Good Communication

Ideal communication, especially when mental illness is involved, should consist of a number of elements:

- Clear communication. This will increase our chance that the message we intend to send is the one that is received.
- Willingness to listen to concerns and worries of family members.
- Use of language that is understandable to all persons involved.

When a family member has a mental illness, effective communication is even more important than usual. Your family member can experience stress when they have difficulty understanding what is said or what is expected of them. It can also be stressful when there are many arguments or too much criticism in the household. Stress is a common trigger for relapse, so it is important to reduce stress whenever possible.

Effective communication takes time, practice and cooperation.

Communication Guidelines

Avoid laying blame. Try not to blame yourself or your family member for the mental illness.

Remember, mental and substance use disorders are illnesses just like diabetes or high blood pressure.

Good communication is a matter of practice, persistence and using many of the skills we already have.

- Use short, clear direct sentences. Long, involved explanations may be difficult to follow as some mental disorders make concentrating difficult. Short, clear, and specific statements are easier to understand and answer.
- Keep the content of communication simple and focused. Cover only one topic; give only one direction at a time. Otherwise, it can be very confusing to follow the conversation, especially for someone with a mental illness.
- Do what you can to keep the ‘stimulation level’ as low as possible. A loud voice, an insistent manner, making accusations and criticisms can be very stressful for anyone who has suffered a mental breakdown.
- If your family member appears withdrawn and uncommunicative, back off for a while. Your communication will have a better chance of getting the desired response when your family member is more open to talking.
- You may find that your family member has difficulty remembering what you have said. You may have to repeat instructions and directions.
- Be pleasant and firm. If you make your position clear and do not undermine what you are expressing, your family member will not as readily misinterpret it.
- If the discussion turns into an argument, everyone involved in the discussion should agree to call a ‘time-out.’ It can be helpful to take a few deep breaths or take a short walk, then go back to the discussion.
- Listen carefully to what your family member tells you. Acknowledge that you appreciate their point of view and understand their feelings.

Expressing Ourselves Clearly

Below are some examples of ambiguous communications. In the column beside, we have provided some examples of clearer, more concrete language.

Suggestions for Making Clear Statements:

- Use short statements or questions
- Make one request at a time
- Be as specific as possible. For example, focus on a behaviour rather than making a generalization
- Avoid using highly negative statements

Ambiguous

Clearer

“You are inconsiderate.”

“I would like you to clean up after you make a snack.”

“I need more independence.”

“I would like to go out with my friends on the weekend.”

“We don’t communicate enough.”

“I would like if we could talk about our plans for this weekend.”

“I wish you’d be more attentive.”

“I would like if you would put down what you’re doing and listen to me.”

“You do a lot around here.”

“I’m grateful that you do the cooking and look after the children when they come home from school.”

Communication Is Both Verbal and Nonverbal

When we communicate face to face with another person, we use both spoken words and nonverbal actions to communicate our messages. Although these are often separated as two types of communication, in practice they are intertwined. Nonverbal actions can work in concert with the spoken words to provide emphasis and additional information not conveyed by the words, communicate emotions and feelings, and to indicate understanding and participation in a conversation.

It is important to be aware of how we use nonverbal communication. In some situations our words may convey one message while non-verbally we are communicating something quite different. For example, a person might say “Oh, that’s just great!” while indicating non-verbally they aren’t happy. The message we send non-verbally should be congruent with what we say.

Also, when listening to others, it’s always important to listen to the whole message and to understand the overall communication. For example, a person may say they will do something, but their lack of enthusiasm is expressed non-verbally. What the person may be telling us is that they are feeling obligated to say yes, but they really don’t want to. In this case, we may want to follow-up by exploring the reasons why the person is reluctant.

Communication Skills

Much of our communication involves trying to get people to understand what we think, feel, or believe about their behaviour and to influence them to behave in certain ways. How messages are framed influence how they are received by the other person. Framing includes qualities such as tone of voice and our choice of words.

Telling People What Pleases Us: Communication of Praise

Letting others know that what they do pleases us encourages them to do more of those actions. Praise involves communication of positive feelings for specific good behaviour. We all need compliments about our behaviours that are pleasing, kind or helpful. People with mental illness struggle with their self-esteem. Hearing that one has done well or has pleased the other person can help build self-esteem. Small accomplishments are important, particularly when someone is dealing with a mental disorder. At times of stress and discouragement, this helps a person to keep making efforts, even when progress is very slow.

- 1 Look at the person**
- 2 Using a friendly tone of voice, say exactly what they did that pleased you**
- 3 Tell the person how it made you feel**

It is important to be specific about the behaviour that you liked. Vagueness makes it difficult to know exactly what the person did that you found positive. Consider the examples below:

Vague

“I thought what you did yesterday was wonderful.”

Specific

“Helping the boys with their homework yesterday was very nice of you. It made me proud.”

Improving communication can reduce stress for persons with mental or substance use disorders. Reducing stress decreases the chances of a relapse.

Eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expression are important nonverbal behaviours that contribute to effective communication.

Some mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, affect a person’s ability to understand nonverbal communication.

Behaviours of individuals affect our relationship with them. We can all benefit from respectful feedback about how our behaviours and how our actions affect those around us.

Acknowledging a helpful or positive action or attitude has two benefits:

- 1 it lets your family member know that the positive action has been noticed and appreciated**
- 2 it makes it more likely that the positive action will be done again**

Expressing Negative Feelings

Inevitably, no matter how well people get along with each other, certain behaviours irritate even the best of us. Constructive expression of negative feelings provides feedback to others about how their behaviour affects us. If we don't express feelings about the behaviour, others will never know their behaviour annoys us. By expressing our feelings in a constructive way, we can avoid bottling up emotions or expressing them in a hurtful or unhelpful way.

Negative feelings can be difficult to express—we may feel it will hurt the person or we fear the reaction of the other person. How we express our feelings is just as important as the message itself. It is possible to provide constructive feedback about actions that affect us in a negative way.

It is very difficult to change personality, attitudes, or feelings. However, if specific behaviours are identified as desirable or undesirable, it is more likely that the person will be able to work on changing these behaviours. Also, people tend to be more open to changing when people express unpleasant feelings about their behaviour, rather than their personality or character.

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- 1 **Look at the person**
- 2 **Speak firmly (but not harshly)**
- 3 **Specify the behaviour**
- 4 **Tell the person how it made you feel**
- 5 **Suggest how the person might prevent this from happening in the future (or suggest a problem-solving discussion)**

Focusing on precise behaviours reduces the risk of overgeneralization, for example:

Overgeneralized

“You’re the most untidy person I’ve ever had to live with.”

Specific

“I don’t like the way that you cleaned up the kitchen.”

It also avoids threatening or nagging communication which is seldom effective. Threatening or nagging can evoke an angry response which is likely to further reduce the chances the person will change their behaviour. Below are some examples of threatening or nagging messages which should be avoided.

Avoid nagging messages:

“If you want to continue living here, you’d better get the kitchen cleaned up.”

“When are you going to clean up the kitchen? I’ve asked you over and over again but you still haven’t done it.”



When someone does something that makes you feel sad or angry, let them know in a calm, non-critical way. Do not assume that the other person will guess or that he or she 'should' know how you feel.

Examples of Expressing Negative Feelings Constructively

“I felt angry when you shouted at me before dinner. I’d appreciate if you would speak quieter next time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that you did not get the course you wanted. Let’s sit down after dinner and discuss some other possibilities.”

“I get very anxious when you tell me I should be going out more. It would help me if you didn’t nag me about it.”

People with mental illnesses can be particularly sensitive to harsh and critical voice tones. Tone of voice may put the person on the defensive. They will be less likely to hear what is being said and less likely to try to do what you’re asking.

Communication of negative feelings works best when it is accompanied by:

a) A request for a different behaviour.

Again it is important to be specific about the behaviour. Also a request that is phrased in a polite way and includes how much it would be appreciated is more likely to be successful than a demanding or ‘nagging’ way.

Example:

“It irritates me when you play your music loudly. I would appreciate if you would play your stereo at a lower volume.”

OR

b) A request for a problem-solving discussion.

Whenever possible, it is often more successful if the problem can be resolved jointly. If the other person feels like they have a say in the issue, they are more likely to work at behaving differently.

Example:

“It bothers me how much you sit at home and watch TV. I have suggested that you try to go out for a while but you don’t seem to want to do that. I’d like to have a discussion about this and see if we can come up with a plan to find other activities for you to do.”

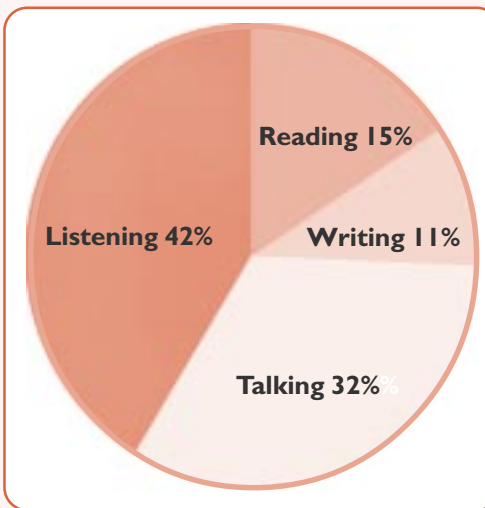
Listening

Listening is an important but often taken-for-granted part of communicating. Listening involves both hearing the message correctly and interpreting it in the way it was intended by the speaker.

Listening is an active process—it is not just passively taking information, but rather involves selectively taking in some information while ignoring other irrelevant background noise. In many of our interactions with others, we are dealing with a host of competing demands for a person’s attention.

Being an effective listener also means providing feedback to the speaker either non-verbally (e.g., head nods, facial expressions) or through the use of verbal “Uh huhs.” This lets the other person know that you are attending to what they are saying.

Average Time Spent in Communication



Set aside a time each day that is devoted to talking with your family member. Find a place to talk where there are no distractions.

When was the last time you gave another person your full and undivided attention as they were speaking to you?

How would you rate yourself as a listener?

How much of your time was spent listening yesterday?

Attentive Listening

Two important features of listening are:

- **Paying attention to the person speaking**
- **Ensuring that you understand what the person is saying**

Attention may be reduced as a result of the busy lives we all lead. How many times have you tried to have a conversation with a family member while preparing dinner, watching TV or driving? It’s important to make sure that you are giving the other person your undivided attention. Often when we talk to each other, we don’t listen attentively.

- 1 Look at the person talking**
- 2 Attend to what they are saying**
- 3 Indicate to the person that you are listening (e.g., Nod your head, say “Uh-huh”)**
- 4 Ask clarifying questions if you don’t understand. Identify areas where you need more information**
- 5 Check out what you’ve heard (paraphrase or summarize what the person said)**

Attentive listening can help facilitate discussion of a problem or other important family issues.

Listening Can Be Enhanced By:

- **Repeating the message back to confirm it was heard correctly**
- **Reducing noise in the environment (e.g., radio or television) or distractions that take our attention away from listening to the person**
- **Being aware that physical or mental fatigue can interfere with our ability to listen**

Lengthy discussion or the addition of irrelevant issues can lead to boredom which, in turn, can reduce our attentiveness to what is being said. If the discussion seems

to be going nowhere, it may be better to postpone it until a later time when you are more refreshed; make sure you do get back to it. Also try to stick to one issue at a time.

Indicating to the person that you are following along is helpful to facilitating communication. Imagine trying to talk with someone who:

- doesn't look at you
- doesn't say anything
- shows no expression on their face

How would you know whether your message got across to them?

An Example of Listening

While you're reading this scenario, think about alternative ways to respond to Emily.

It's Thursday night and Susan has arrived home late from the office. Everyone is starving and she's frantically trying to make dinner. Her daughter Emily walks into the kitchen.

"Hi, how was your day?" Susan says.

"Fine, but I need to talk with you about something," replies Emily. She sits down at the kitchen table.

"Okay, what's up?" Susan reads the recipe and it calls for a number of ingredients. Green onions, two cloves of garlic, can of peas, ...

"Oh darn," she thinks to herself, "we don't have any canned peas."

"I'm feeling pretty anxious about this test tomorrow. It's worth a lot of my grade and I don't feel I understand the material."

"Uh huh." Darn, Susan realizes the recipe won't work, it needs to marinate overnight. She decides to find another one. She flips through the recipe book to find something else.

"I've re-read the chapters over and over but it's not staying in my head. I'm worried that I'll fail the course if I don't do well on this test."

"Yeah, uh huh, I'm sure you'll do fine." Susan thinks to herself, "There's gotta be something else I can make for dinner tonight."

"Well I guess I'll go read over my notes one more time."

"That's a good idea honey. I'll call you when dinner's ready."

If Susan had decided to delay dinner and focus on Emily's concerns, what could she say to Emily?

How would you rate this listener?

What could she have done differently?



Some Barriers to Listening

Communication from others seldom comes in isolation of other sounds from the environment. Listening requires us to be able to separate the communication from the background noise of our environment. Avoid letting distractions interfere with your communication.

Shutting off the television or radio, letting the answering machine pick up when the telephone rings, finding a quiet place to talk all make it easier for us to focus on listening.

Some barriers are internal rather than external. We may bring preconceived ideas of what we think the speaker will say to the listening situation. We ignore what the speaker is actually saying by assuming we already know what they will say.

We may be distracted, half listening while we do something else, and half thinking about something else. We may think we're listening, when in truth, we're busy formulating our response back. We may assume we know what the person is going to say and respond back based on our guess rather than on what the person is actually saying. We may interrupt before the person has had a chance to complete their thought.

Verbal or nonverbal feedback greatly enhances communication. Eye contact, alert facial expression, head nods, saying "Uh-huh" or "Yeah, I see" let the speaker know that the listener is paying attention and understands what they are trying to say. Asking questions helps to clarify parts that are vague or where more information is needed. They help the speaker know what more they need to say in order to be clear and complete. Checking out the accuracy of what you've heard by paraphrasing or summarizing helps to ensure that you've heard the person correctly. In some communication, this will likely also involve empathy—checking out the 'feeling' portion of the message.

Paraphrasing is particularly helpful when you are giving or listening to a set of instructions. Having the listener repeat back the instructions not only helps to ensure they heard it correctly but may also help in remembering the instructions.

Listening Is Often an Underdeveloped Skill

Test your listening ability in the next conversation you have. As the person speaks, focus on remembering the essential information being shared by the speaker. After they have finished talking, summarize back to them what you heard. Ask the person whether the summary is correct and to clarify any meanings if necessary.



Suggestions for Increasing Your Ability to Listen

Focus on the message, not the person speaking.

This helps to avoid prejudging the message, based on our feelings towards the speaker, who they are, or what we think they are saying.

Focus on their thoughts, not your own thoughts.

This helps to prevent you from focusing on your response back to the message.

Supportive Listening Skills

Supportive listening is listening with the purpose of helping the other person. Understanding the message correctly is still important, however, concern with feedback and support is added. It requires the ability to listen and respond empathetically.

Often we are called upon to help another person with a concern or problem they are having. Our main role in this situation is to act as a sounding board for that person, to hear them out.

Consider who you go to when you want to talk about a personal problem. What listening skills does that person use? What is it about their listening ability that makes you choose them over others to whom you also feel close?

The goal of supportive listening is to assist the person with the problem or concern through a process whereby they come up with a solution.



Some Qualities of Supportive Listening

- **Being attentive**
- **Listening with empathy —not trying to solve the problem yourself**
- **Encouraging the person to explore the problem and possible solutions thoroughly—let them talk their way to the solution**
- **Listening to the emotions associated with the problem**

Empathy

Empathy is an important quality of our interactions, particularly with those close to us. Being empathetic means being able to put yourself in the shoes of the other person and to appreciate their experience from *their* perspective or frame of reference. It is the ability to understand, be sensitive to and care about the feelings of the other person. Empathy doesn't mean you have to agree with what the person is saying, rather it is letting the other person know that you appreciate how they feel. Empathy is invaluable in assisting us to communicate effectively. Showing empathy can help encourage a person to open up about their feelings, worries and concerns.

How well do you communicate with your family members? Sometimes it is easier to communicate with friends, colleagues and strangers than it is with our own family.

You can use the worksheet on the next page to help you identify your positive communication habits, as well as which communication skills you may want to improve on.

Worksheet: Assess Your Communication Skills

For each of the following items, assess your strength by giving yourself a rating between 1 (low) and 5 (high). Ratings of 3 or less suggest skills you may want to work on.

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Sometimes

4 Usually

5 Always

- I am a good listener and seldom miss what others are saying to me.
- I am easily able to read others' nonverbal communication.
- I can usually manage conflicts with other people without too much difficulty.
- I am usually able to find the appropriate words for expressing myself.
- I check with the other person to see if they have understood me correctly.
- I share my personal thoughts and experiences when it's appropriate.
- When I am wrong, I am not afraid to admit it.
- I find it easy to give compliments to others.
- I tend to pick up on how people are feeling.
- I generally try to put effort into understanding the other person's point of view.
- I make an effort to not let my negative emotions get in the way of a meaningful conversation.
- I am comfortable in expressing my opinions.
- I make an effort to compliment others when they do something that pleases me.
- When I have the impression that I might have harmed someone's feelings, I apologize.
- I try not to become defensive when I am being criticized.
- I check with others to ensure that I have been understood.
- When uncomfortable about speaking to someone, I speak directly rather than using hints.
- I try not to interrupt when someone else is speaking.
- I show interest in what people are saying through my comments and facial expressions.
- When I don't understand a question or idea, I ask for additional explanation.
- It bothers me when a person pretends to listen when in fact they are not really listening.
- I try not to jump to conclusions before a person has finished speaking and make an effort to listen to the rest of what they have to say.
- I look directly at people when they are speaking.
- I listen with disciplined concentration, not letting my thoughts wander when others are speaking.
- I do not find it difficult to ask people to do things for me.
- I express my opinions directly but not forcefully.
- I am able to speak up for myself.
- I try not to interpret what someone else is saying but rather ask questions that help clarify.

Dealing with Communication Problems

Confused or Unclear talk

If the person is not expressing their ideas clearly or the ideas are confusing:

- Let the person know you are having difficulties and want to understand what they are saying
- Ask the person to speak more clearly. You can help by asking them to rephrase or to provide more information.
- Restate what was said so you can check whether you understood the message.

Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings can occur as a result of jumping to conclusions or misinterpreting what was said. Cognitive difficulties that arise in mental disorders can make understanding difficult.

If a misunderstanding occurs:

- Calmly and briefly say what you meant and then either change the subject or walk away.
- Avoid arguing or discussing the misunderstanding at length. Apologize if your message was unclear.
- Consider that cognitive difficulties of the listener may have led to the misunderstanding.
- Losing your temper or criticizing does not accomplish anything and will likely hurt the person and make the situation worse.

Talking to Children and Youth about Mental Illness

When mental illness affects a family, the children are just as confused and scared as adult family members. They know something is wrong. They need information and explanations to help them to understand what is happening. Children often imagine things that are worse than what is really happening. Parents and older siblings can help dispel fears and anxieties. Help your child to be supportive of their family member by talking to them about mental illness. Be honest but optimistic.

Talk to your child using language and explanations that are appropriate to their age level and maturity. Look for books and handouts that are written for children. Comparing mental illness to other physical illnesses can help normalize the illness. If they have some knowledge of another chronic illness such as asthma, you can use them as examples that ongoing care is needed and that people have re-occurrences of symptoms.

It is important to be educated about the particular disorder you're dealing with. If your child asks you a question you don't know how to answer, be honest and tell them you don't know. Let them know you will try to find out.

What you say and do regarding your family member's illness will probably influence your child more than anything you tell them to do. Be a positive role model.

Questions Children Commonly Ask

- **Why is my [family member] acting this way?**
- **Is it my fault?**
- **Can I catch it?**
- **Will they always be this way?**
- **Do they still love me?**
- **Why is this happening to our family?**

Age Appropriate Explanations

Young children need less specific information because of their limited ability to understand. They will likely focus on what they can see—a family member behaving strangely or the emotions they see such as crying or angry outbursts. Keep explanations simple.

School-age children will likely ask more questions and want more specifics. They will likely want to know why someone is acting the way they do. They may also worry about their safety.

Teenagers can generally handle more complex information about mental illness. They may likely have already learned something about it but will likely have many more questions.

Young children often feel guilty or afraid while older children may feel more angry and embarrassed.

Suggestions for What to Talk About

- Ask your child what they think is the reason for why their family member has been acting differently. Use their response as a way to begin talking about mental illness or substance use.
- Ask a child about the way their family member acts and how it makes them feel. Help them to express their feelings. Let them know that feelings are neither right nor wrong. It's OK and natural for them to have the feelings they're having.
- Explain that sometimes mental illness can make a person act in strange, confusing or scary ways. Ask how that makes them feel.

Children, especially young children, often believe that if something happens in their world it is linked to something they did. Ask your child if they somehow feel they are to blame for their family member becoming ill. Reassure your child that their family member's mental illness was not their fault. Mental illness is nobody's fault.

Make sure your child knows what to do and who to call if they don't feel safe.

Explain to your child that even though other families may have mental illnesses too, many people still don't understand what mental illness is. Help your child to realize that when they try to talk about their family member's illness, their friends (and even adults) may make fun of it. They may say things that aren't true, or they may not know what to say. Practice with your child what they might say to their friends and other people. Let your child know that you are there to listen if they do want to talk.

Example of what children might say to their friends:

“My brother has an illness that makes him act strange at times. He's taking medicine and trying to get better. It's really hard for me, so please don't tease me about it.”

Tips for Effective Communication

- Listen attentively
- Ask questions and invite questions
- Provide feedback to your family member and ask for feedback from them
- Be tolerant of others
- Be honest
- Demonstrate respect by being open
- Clarify your own ideas before communicating
- Communicate purposely—focus on your real message
- Consider the timing, setting and social climate
- Acknowledge your family member's perspective and explain your own perspective
- Be aware of your tone and facial expressions
- Show empathy; put yourself in the other person's shoes
- Use humour when appropriate
- Look for common goals

Conflict Situations

When faced with a conflict situation, many of us begin to feel uncomfortable about what to do. Sometimes we will try to avoid the issue and hope it will go away. However, conflict situations seldom go away on their own (or at least not often enough). In addition, while we may be successful in avoiding dealing with the situation, the issues themselves remain. Gradually more issues are stored up. Resentment builds inside of us. Eventually what can happen is that we reach a point where numerous issues come to the surface in a single ‘mega-conflict’ situation. The result may be that our emotions fly high and resolution of the situation is blocked.

Suggestions for Dealing with Conflict

- Deal with issues as they arise. If emotions are very heated, allow some time to cool down and plan to discuss at another time. Be sure to follow-up on your intention.
- Solve one problem at a time. Promise to come back to other issues later and keep your promise.
- Work in a collaborative fashion whereby all persons involved gain something from the resolution.
- Be direct and specific about the particular issue—but sensitive to the other person.
- Identify the behaviour that is causing the problem rather than generalizing. Separate your feelings about the behaviour from your feelings about your family member.
- Consider bringing in a third party if you feel that, as a family, you are unable to resolve a conflict.

Choose Your Conflicts

Here you will find a ‘tip sheet’ that may help to prevent some conflicts from arising. The sheet was designed for families with young children, however, with some modifications may also be useful when dealing with other ages.

Tips on Avoiding Conflict: Learning How to Respond Differently

Many children with mental disorders are inflexible and have a low frustration tolerance. The Basket Concept was designed to help reduce meltdowns and conflicts with these children. It’s really about picking your battles, or in this case, baskets.

Basket A

Behaviours in Basket A are non-negotiable, in other words, unsafe behaviours—defined as those that could be harmful to your child, other people, animals or property. These are non-negotiable and are worth inducing and enduring meltdowns over.

Basket B

Behaviours in Basket B are high priority but over which you are not willing to induce a meltdown. The behaviours in this basket are where, over time, you’re going to help your child develop skills that are lacking like alternative solutions, hanging in there in the midst of frustrations etc. It is situations in this basket where your child recognizes that you’re able to help them learn coping. Example: curfew time or sibling relationships.

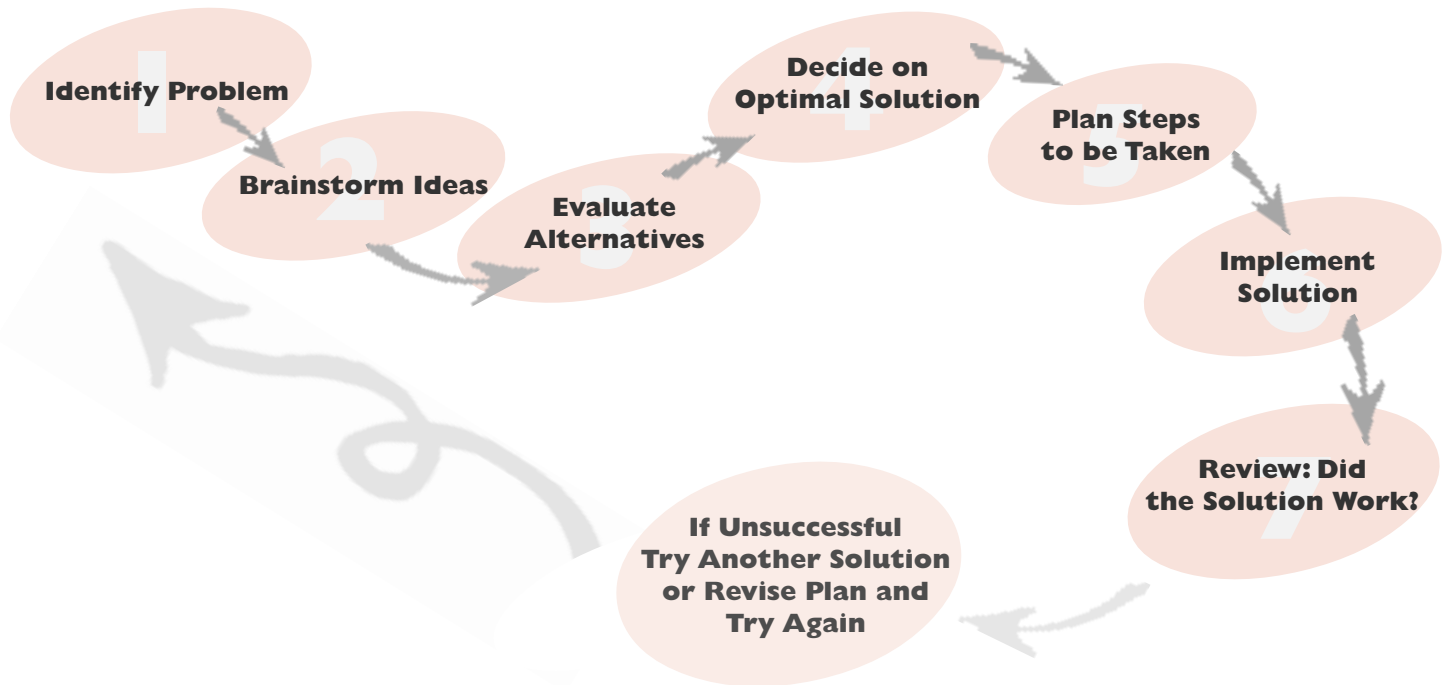
Basket C

Behaviours in Basket C are what once seemed important, or high priority, but have since been downgraded. The idea is that if a behaviour is in Basket C, you don’t even mention it anymore. Example: Eating too much sugar or not wanting to wear a coat. When the explosive behaviours and meltdowns have been reduced, items from Basket C can be moved to Basket B.

~The Explosive Child, Ross Green

A Structured Approach to Problem-Solving

The following steps offer a structured approach to the resolution of problems.



Step 1 Identify the Problem

Getting a clear definition of the problem is critical to successful resolution. Understanding the specific problem also helps us to know when the problem has been resolved, that is, how things will be different.

Problems can be clarified using active listening skills reviewed earlier in this module:

- 1 Look at the person; take interest in what they are saying
- 2 Reduce any distractions and listen carefully to what they say
- 3 Show or indicate that you are following what they are saying
- 4 Ask questions if you are unclear what the problem is
- 5 Check that you have understood by telling the person what you thought they were saying

It is important to focus on one issue. Too often we let issues build up and then try to solve all of them at once. Or sometimes in the course of discussing one issue, others arise.

Tackle one issue at a time. Avoid getting sidetracked. If other issues arise, agree to set aside another time to deal with them.

Step 2 Brainstorm Solutions

Brainstorming involves coming up with as many alternative solutions as possible. Encourage everyone to use their imagination—no matter how absurd the idea may seem. Ridiculous solutions can sometimes lead to discovery of a better solution than those that were more obvious at first. At this stage, possible solutions are just generated—not discussed. It is helpful to write these down for evaluation later.

Step 3 Evaluate Solutions

List all the positive and negative features of each solution. Remember even bad solutions can have positive features such as being easy to apply but not really solving the problem.

Step 4 Deciding on an Optimal Solution

The goal at this point is to pick a solution or set of solutions that seem the best option for resolving the problem. It is best if this solution is one that is not too difficult to implement. This may mean deciding upon a solution that may not be the 'ideal' one. A workable solution can help get started toward a resolution of the problem. Even if it doesn't work, what is learned from it can be helpful if further action is needed. This is likely to be a better course of action than choosing a solution that is impossible to achieve.

Step 5 Plan

Resolution of a situation often involves taking a number of steps. Working out the details of the plan will help to ensure its success. Does everyone involved know what they need to do? Have you planned any strategies for coping with unexpected difficulties?

Step 6 Implement Solution

Once you have the plan and the steps figured out, put it into action!

Step 7 Review

Problem-solving can require a number of attempts. It is important to evaluate the process as you move along. The first attempt to resolve the problem may not succeed—hitches or unexpected difficulties may arise. Some steps may need to be changed or new ones added. It is important to remember what has been learned and to praise the efforts of those involved. If the solution does not work, ask yourself (and those involved) the following questions:

What actions or steps were successful?

What actions weren't successful?

What could have been done differently?

If you want more detail on this structured problem-solving approach, see our wellness module on problem-solving at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/helpmewith

- Encourage everyone to acknowledge feelings of disappointment but don't dwell on them. Failure is usually the result of poor planning or events beyond anyone's control rather than inadequacy of the person.
- Any attempt is a small success that should be praised. It may help to consider the first few attempts as practice or as steps to resolving the problem. Even partial solutions are useful.
- Encourage the individual to try again.

Problem-Solving Scenario

Mary is bothered by the fact that John comes to her at the end of each month for money. Although he has a part-time job and receives disability benefits, he always seems to be broke at the end of the month. John doesn't like having to ask Mary for money. They decide to see if they can think of a solution to this problem.

Define the Problem

Vague

John is always broke.

Specific

John runs out of money at the end of each month and asks Mary for additional funds.

Brainstorm Solutions

- 1 *John could keep a record of spending—dates and items purchased. This will help him to set up a budget.*
- 2 *John could ask for more hours.*
- 3 *John could ask an increase in his salary.*
- 4 *John could make fewer purchases.*

Can you think of other ways to resolve this situation?

Problem-Solving Tips

- Problem-solving skills need to be practiced
- Highly charged emotional issues need to be handled with care
- Try not to solve issues when you are tired or stressed

Evaluate Alternatives

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 <i>A record of spending will help to know where his money is going.</i> 2 <i>More hours will bring in more money.</i> 3 <i>John has been doing good work at his job and deserves a raise.</i> 4 <i>By not buying as much, John will have more money in his account. He wouldn't have to ask Mary for money and could start saving for more expensive items he'd like to buy.</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 <i>John has never had to keep a record and may find it difficult to do.</i> 2 <i>John is reluctant to work more as it puts more stress on him.</i> 3 <i>John is scared to ask his boss for a raise.</i> 4 <i>John would have to change his route home to avoid going by the stores.</i> |
|---|--|

Decide on Optimal Solution

John and Mary decide that John will keep a record of spending so they can create a budget for him and figure out where he can cut his spending.

Plan Steps to Be Taken

They work out a plan so that it is easy for John to remember what he buys.

Implement Plan

John keeps a record of the purchases he makes and bills that need to be paid.

Review

At the end of the following month, John and Mary review John's record of spending. Although he still ran out of money, the record provides useful information about what John spends his money on.

John notices that he spends money on lunches when he goes to work. He decides to start making his own lunch in order to save money.

Stages of Change

The Stages of Change Model outlines the different stages that people move through when contemplating a change in their behaviour.

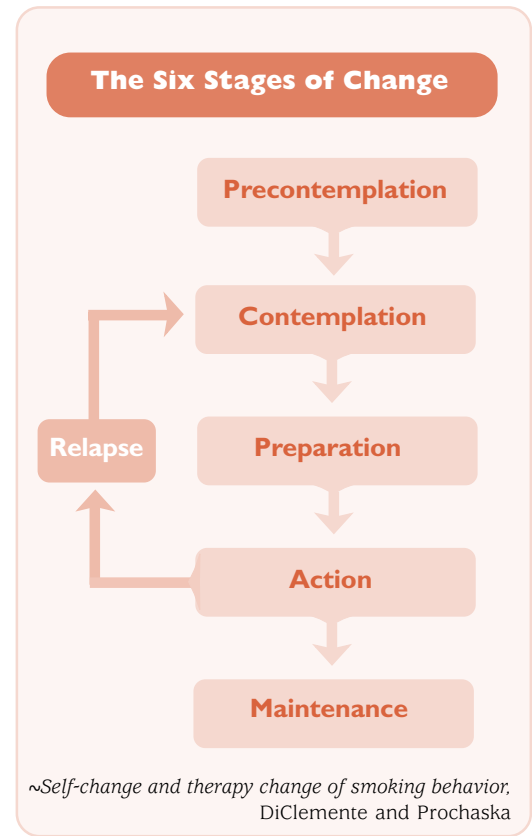
The idea behind this model is that behaviour change does not happen in one step. Instead, the model proposes that a person progresses through different stages on their way to successful change. Each person progresses through the stages at their own individual rate and may go back and forth between stages.

A person’s readiness to change their behaviour depends, in part, on what stage they are in. In the early stages, the person may not be ready for change, so expecting a certain behaviour change within a certain period of time is rather naive (and perhaps counterproductive) because the person is not ready to change. The decision to change must come from within the person—stable, long term change cannot be externally imposed by another person.

Understanding the process of change is important when trying to support a family member make a change in their life.

Changing our behaviour is not an easy task and takes time.

Understanding where your family member is in this process can help you to identify what you can do to assist them.



The Six Stages of Change

Precontemplation

In this stage, a person has no intention of changing their behaviour; they likely haven’t even thought about it. They may not see the behaviour as problematic. For example, a teenager may believe that his drinking is just “having fun with his friends.” He may feel his parents are just exaggerating the extent of his drinking.

The person may not be fully aware of a problem possibly because they lack information about their behaviour or problem. Raising their awareness may help them to think about the benefits of changing their behaviour and help to move them to the next stage.

The person may be heavily invested in the problem behaviour or wanting to be in control. Suggesting choices may be helpful as it enables the person to have a say in the situation.

The person may believe that they cannot change their behaviour and as a result believes the situation is hopeless. Explore the barriers to change and attempt to instill hope.

The goal at this stage is not to make the person change their behaviour but rather to get them thinking about the possibility of change and whether it may be beneficial to them. A non-judgemental attitude helps to lower any defensiveness about the behaviour.

Contemplation

In this stage, the person recognizes that a problem exists and is open to considering action but has not made a commitment to change. Ambivalence is a cornerstone of this stage. The person may wax and wane as they consider the possibility of change. They are open to information but have not been fully convinced.

Information and incentives are important at this stage. Discuss with your family member the pros and cons of the behaviour as well as the pros and cons of change. Let them describe this from their perspective. Even when someone isn't willing to change, they may still see some negative aspects of the behaviour.

Understanding what they see as the positive aspects of the behaviour will help in identifying barriers to change. Ask about previous attempts to change. Look at these in terms of 'some success' rather than 'failures.' Offer additional options if the person is interested.

Preparation

At this stage the person has decided to take some action and may have already taken steps in that direction. As a person moves through this stage, they work towards a serious attempt at changing. Their ambivalence is decreasing, although pros and cons are still being weighed.

Help your family member to build an action plan and remove any barriers. Figuring out a way to evaluate the success of the plan is also important.

Action

In this stage the person is aware of the problem and actively works towards modifying their behaviour or life in order to overcome the problem. Change usually requires sustained effort.

Support your family member by helping them to evaluate their change plan. Is it working? Where are the problems? Does the plan include ways to handle little slips? What can the family do to help?

Acknowledge the successes and your family member's commitment to change. Frame any changes as being the result of the person's own actions (rather than being externally imposed).

Maintenance

In this stage, the person has developed a new pattern of behaviour which is becoming more firmly established. The possibility of slipping back into the old behaviour is becoming less and less.

Reassure your family member that they can maintain the change. Assist in developing a plan for when they are feeling worried they will slip. If a slip does occur, encourage your family member not to give up. Change often involves multiple attempts, and slips are normal.

Slow the process down and explore what did work and what didn't work. Praise your family member for their efforts and commitment to making the change.

Motivating Your Family Member to Make a Change

Below are four basic principles that apply to motivating change in a person.

Express Empathy

When talking with your family member, try to listen to what they say without making judgment. Accept their point of view and let them know that it is normal to have mixed feelings about wanting to make a change.

Avoid Argument

All of us want to want to be able to have a say in how we behave. The more someone tells us how things are or what to do, the more defensive we may become. Instead of taking an authoritarian approach (i.e., “You need to ...”), it is more helpful to focus on the negative consequences of continuing to engage in the behaviour and begin to devalue the positive aspects of the undesired behaviour. The person does not have to admit to the behaviour. The goal here is for the person to begin to see the benefits of change and develop arguments in support of moving towards the desired behaviour.

Roll with Resistance

It's OK to offer new ideas but they may be rejected or resisted by your family member. Offer but do try to force them on your family member. Reinforce any positive steps they are already taking (even small steps are important). Your family member may be ambivalent (i.e., has mixed feelings) about making a change. This is a normal part of the change process. Help your family member to explore these feelings as they often contain the seeds of actual change.

Support Self-Efficacy (confidence in ability to make the change)

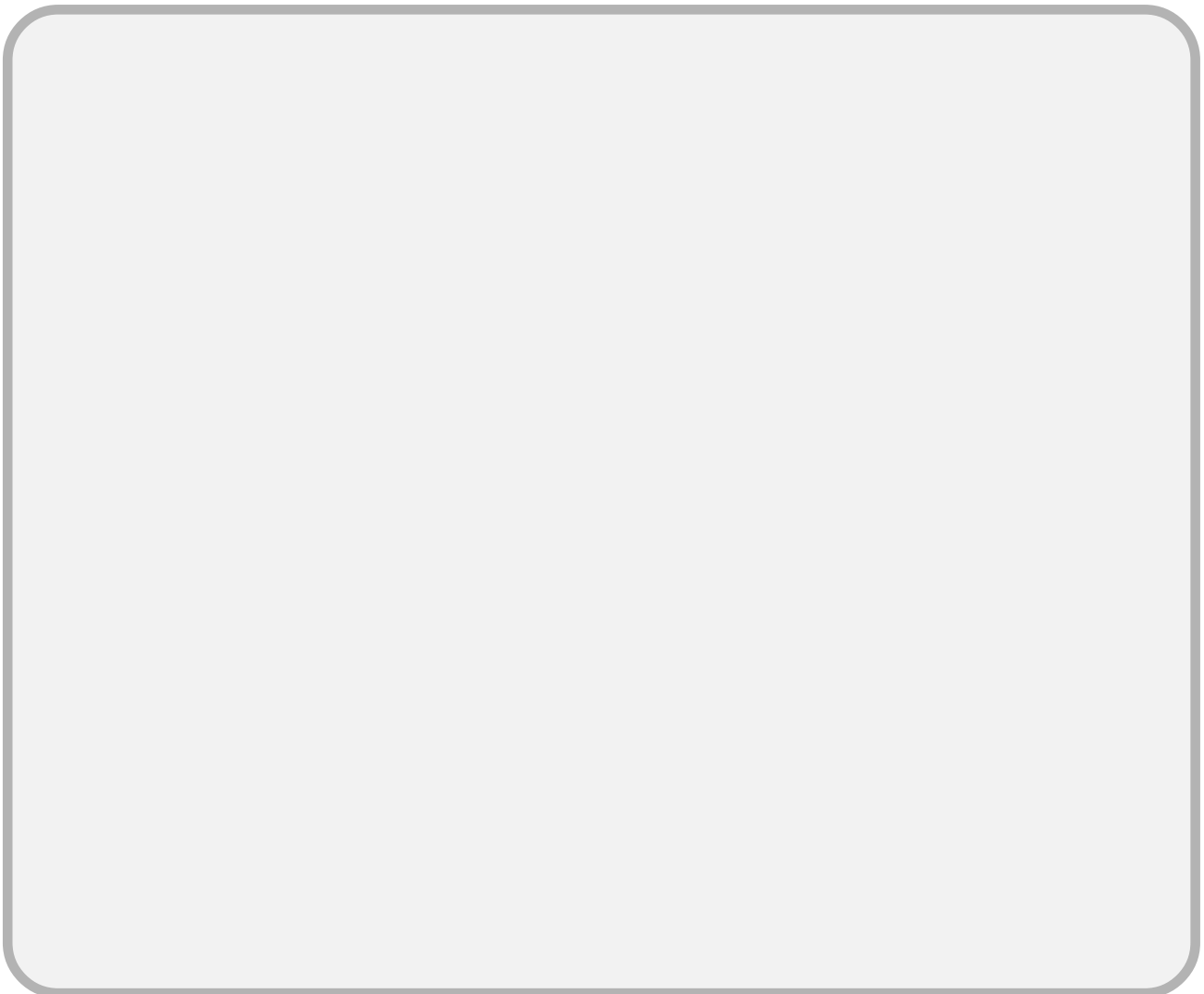
People are more motivated to change when they believe they have the ability and capacity to make the change. Encourage your family member and let them know you believe in their ability. Reinforce thinking confidently about making what is likely a very difficult change. Unless they believe they will be successful, they are unlikely to continue working on their problems.

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For a complete list of references used in developing the Family Toolkit, please see Family Toolkit: References at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/helpmewith.

Notes





Reader Feedback Form

The BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information are committed to providing quality information and resources on mental and substance use disorders. We welcome your comments, suggestions, and feedback about this family toolkit.

Did you find the information provided in the “How You Can Help” toolkit useful?

Was the information presented in clear and understandable language?

Did you find the worksheets helpful?

Are there any additional topics you feel should be included?

Do you have any recommendations as to how we could improve this toolkit?

Please mail or fax this evaluation back to us or fill out our online version of this form at www.heretohelp.bc.ca where you will find further information and resources regarding a variety of mental health issues.

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