Words of kindness and comfort

Supporting someone who is upset –teaching guidance.

### Explores how a person who is supporting someone who is upset might approach the situation. Use this guidance as background information to help you deliver the ‘words of kindness and comfort – practise activity’.

### The first step

### Carry out a quick and thoughtful assessment of the situation for the person experiencing distress:

* What is happening?
* Is the situation an emergency and does anyone need immediate medical attention?
* Notice who else is around. Are they likely to be helpful, or otherwise?

Then, crucially, check yourself. Think about what shape you are in. How have you been affected by the situation? The aim is to be calm. If you are calm, you can help others, if you aren't, it’s likely that you won’t be much help. If you are calm enough to help someone else, that's good. If you are not, you might look for help for yourself.

**What then?**

If you are going to help, follow this advice:

* Introduce yourself; say your name, your position and what your intentions are. For instance, "I'm Jaz, I'm a community support worker, and I'm here to help."
* Then calmly say what you are going to do. This might be as simple as, “I’m going to sit next to you and we can talk about the best way I can help you.”
* You can then say what you notice about the current situation - which is why it is important to carry out an assessment of the situation first, as described above.
* You might say that the person seems very upset or is injured.
* Ask how you can help.
* They may not understand what you are saying, especially at first. If they seem confused or unclear, keep what you say simple and remember that you might need to repeat yourself.
* Ask what has happened, how they feel, what they need.
* Bear in mind that you may not be able to make the problem go away. What the person is dealing with might be very upsetting. What they want, to put things right, might not be possible.
* You might not be seen/received in a positive light, so keep at a reasonable distance. Don’t crowd their space but show that you want to help.

**Is a hug the best form of comfort?**

Not necessarily. A touch of the arm might be enough to show someone you care. But don't go further than that unless someone has indicated they would like it.

Luckily, there are better ways to show someone that they are not alone.

**How do you help someone who is upset?**

Good listening is a very good start. It is harder and rarer than a lot of people think. Some ideas are:

* Give people time to talk.
* Give them space and don't crowd them.
* Make eye contact appropriately but don't stare.
* Be physically still and relaxed - not agitated or using sudden body movements.
* When you talk, use a calm voice - don’t shout or whisper and don't interrupt.
* It is best to avoid false reassurance such as, "everything will be okay". After all, it might not be. And even if it is, that may not be how the person is feeling at that moment.
* Offer non-verbal encouragement using phrases like, "mmm" and so on. This indicates that you are listening and are happy to hear what the person is saying.
* A good way to show you have understood is to reflect out loud on what the person has said. You could say, for example, “so, you’re very worried about that”.

**What are things to avoid?**

Here are some basic mistakes to steer clear of:

* Don't try to jolly people up or try to get them to see the funny side. Your task is to respect how they're feeling now and help them deal with it, not suppress it.
* Don't say things like, "I know just how you are feeling, the same thing happened to me". This isn't empathy, it is more like boasting. It is alienating and irritating.
* Don't hurry the next action. Always remember that a person who is upset is vulnerable and probably not in a state for successful decision-making.

**What treatment do they need?**

You could also suggest where to get further assistance, which will depend on the circumstances. Options could include a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher or guardian. If further support is needed a GP, or helplines run by professional organisations such as Childline.

Credits

This briefing is based on research and development work by Dr Sarah Davidson and was written by PJ White and Dr Sarah Davidson. It was produced in March 2009. The classroom activity was published in December 2011. It was reviewed in November 2019.