

Emotion Coaching - Micro-Skills

Micro-skills – Validation:

1. Because-statements that end with a downward inflexion in tone are more likely to yield the desired effect. Otherwise, the other is conditioned to respond with defensiveness (expecting a “but” – whether or not you intend to use one).
2. Because-statements that refer to the other are not as powerful as because-statements that refer to the relationship or the individual offering the validation.

Example: I can understand why you might not want to speak with me because:

- You don't like talking about feelings (*about the other - least powerful*)
- We aren't in the habit of talking about tough stuff (*about the relationship - more powerful*)

3. I don't always understand your perspective (*about the self - most powerful*) Because-statements that reflect an understanding or a reflection of: the goodness of the other, their vulnerable needs or the extent to which they are suffering will increase the effectiveness of your efforts.

Example: I can understand why you might not want to eat because:

- You want control (*less powerful*)
- When you restrict it distracts you from the distress (*more powerful*)

4. Because-statements that are structured in three complete sentences can be more effective than a series of because-statements within a single sentence.

I could understand you might feel _____ because #1 _____ because #2 _____ and because #3 _____
vs

I could understand you might feel _____ because #1

No wonder you might feel _____ because #2

It would make sense that you might feel _____ because #3

5. Validating statements communicated from the heart will be more effective than validating statements that are more rote or strategic in their delivery. When in doubt, caregivers can be inspired by the 3 Hs of validation: “it’s hard”, “it’s heavy” and “it hurts” (I can understand why you’d feel the urge to cut because life feels really hard right now, and the pain is heavy, and it really hurts.)

6. Validating statements should reflect the other’s current state of mind/being. In other words, you may validate their thoughts, attitudes/urges, emotional experiences or core emotions. Should the other be more open to more surface-level validation of thoughts, attitudes and urges, you can use the first two because-statements to do so, followed by a third because- statement that supports a transition from the surface thought or feeling to an underlying emotional state to deepen the effect.

For example:

I could understand you might think this is useless (attitude) because #1

It would make sense that you might feel disappointed (emotional experience) because #2



I can imagine that you might also feel sad/scared/embarrassed (core emotion) because #3

The more frequently emotions can be named and validated, the better as “to name it, is to tame it (D. Siegel)” and individuals who can name their emotions reduce their risk of the development of mental health issues.

7. When validating emotional content, it can be important to mirror the other’s display of affect with respect to tone, volume, facial expressions and physicality. For example, if the other is angry, the validating statements are said with energy and animation; whereas if the other is feeling sad or hopeless, the validating statements are communicated with a softer and slower tone and stance.

In addition, you can combine this strategy with the previous one to support the other to move from the expression of secondary/maladaptive feeling states to healthy primary emotions. For example:

(said with energy and animation to mirror the other) I can understand you’d feel really angry right now (secondary emotion – rejecting anger) because #1

(again, said with energy and animation to mirror the other) It makes sense to me that you might feel this way because #2

(said with a softer tone and stance) I can imagine that you might also feel sad (primary emotion) because #3

8. When the relationship has been affected by life’s challenges, the following validation statements can be very touching and they can be communicated in the context of any dyad:

I can imagine you’d feel hurt/alone/angry/anxious or unsure of the sincerity of my efforts because

- I haven’t always been there in the ways that you needed or wanted
- I will never fully understand what it feels like to be in your situation

Micro-skills – Support:

1. Ensure emotional support is consistent with the context of validation. For example, if the loved one doubts the trustworthiness of their caregiver’s validating statements, the caregiver would reassure their loved one that they are in fact being sincere. If a person is struggling to resist an urge to be symptomatic, their partner may express belief in their ability to resist the urge with support.

2. When offering practical support, it is best to first *provide* a suggestion that is *concrete* before engaging in a process of collaborative problem-solving or asking the other what they think might be helpful. For example, it may be helpful to avoid initial statements like: “let me know how I can help you” or “let’s brainstorm what might be helpful” in favour of statements like: “let’s go for a walk” or “why don’t you try calling a friend”. It’s not that there is anything inherently wrong with seeking input and collaboration; however should the other still feel overwhelmed or at a loss regarding what might be effective, leading with the proposal of specific ideas can help them to clarify their current needs. It’s also possible they feel uneasy or feel guilty taking up others’ time, and this structure makes it easier for them to accept the offer for practical support.

3. Ensure practical support is consistent with the context of validation. For example, if as above, the loved one doubts the trustworthiness of their caregiver’s validating statements, the caregiver would reassure their loved one that they are in fact being sincere, followed by a practical support



suggestion to book a dyadic therapy session. If a person is struggling to resist an urge to be symptomatic, their partner may express belief in their ability to get through this urge with their support followed by a practical support suggestion for distraction (“Why don’t we go for a walk together to shake off that feeling”).



connect with a feeling that was just outside of awareness or they might reject a because-statement and in doing clarify how it is *they are actually* feeling about a situation. and/or

Move from Script to Stance. In addition to practice, it can helpful to use the body to increase the poignancy of your use of the emotion-coaching framework. For example, imagine making the statements from your head, your heart, and then your gut. Feel the difference. In other words, use your words *and* your body to express validation and offer support.

Communicate the Limits to the Approach. It may seem counter-intuitive to regard a communication of the limits of emotion coaching as a micro-skill at first. However, doing so can be incredibly helpful for those with whom you work as it manages expectations and inoculates them against possible discouragement or despair when their efforts do not lead to desired outcomes. It will also help them to remember that there are both short-term (regulation, de-escalation, increase in cooperation) and long-term rationales (building and strengthening the internalization of self-regulation skills) for engaging in this practice with their loved one.

Here are excerpts from the book that may be helpful to describe these processes: Lafrance, A., Henderson, K. A., & Mayman, S. (2020) *Emotion-Focused Family Therapy: A Transdiagnostic Model for Caregiver-Focused Interventions*. American Psychological Association.

“From a neurobiological perspective, when parents attend to their distressed child in a caring and compassionate way, their nonverbal signals (e.g., facial expression, tone of voice) are processed in their child’s limbic system as signals of security and approachability, which leads to a buffering effect (Hughes & Baylin, 2012; Joseph, 1999). Chemically, this process is activated, in part, via the oxytocin system. For example, these caring gestures trigger the release of calming neurochemicals, including oxytocin, from the child’s hypothalamus, sending safety signals to their sensory processing systems and to the limbic system, leading to a calming effect (Hughes & Baylin, 2012).

And...

“Nurturing relationships have also been shown to activate growth-enhancing brain chemistry. This means that when caregivers connect with their loved one in an emotionally attuned manner, it not only creates a short-term calming effect, it also promotes the growth of synaptic connections between the limbic regions of the brain and the frontal lobe, a bridge responsible for emotion regulation (Balbernie, 2001; Hughes, D.A., & Baylin, J, 2012). Given these are neurobiological processes, they are not considered culture-bound or restricted by age, and so it is possible to leverage the neurological power of caregivers in these ways across the life span, and in the context of parental, spousal, and other significant relationships.” (p.30-31)

ⁱ <https://www.edglossary.org/scaffolding/>

