



5 Tips for Reaching Out to Families During a Crisis

Robert Taibbi, LCSW

During this time of national crisis, reaching out and supporting families is a priority. Here are 5 tips to help you help them:

#1. Ask how they are doing.

In your professional role, families essentially look to you to set the agenda. They only know what is okay to talk about based on what you ask about. So, ask how they are doing/coping on an everyday level. This opens the door to their feeling comfortable expressing their feelings.

#2. Listen for voice tone, ask details.

What you may get as a response is, “We’re fine.” Listen for the voice tone: Do they sound “fine”? You may get that enthusiastic response, their voice tone matches what they are saying, and you can move on: “Glad to hear it; does sound like you are doing okay.”

But if you hear hesitation, depression, time to drill down; again, you are setting the agenda about what is safe to talk about. Ask, “How are kids doing? Are they getting bored? Are they driving you bit crazy?” “Have you been worried?” This is asking the hard questions, asking about what you think they may be thinking but are hesitant to talk about.

#3. Anticipate heightened emotions.

When people are anxious, feel vulnerable two things happen: One is the more easily become emotional – angry, frustrated, sad and depressed. The other is that often get tunnel vision: They obsess and fixate on one or two particular problems or needs.

What this translates into is finding families more easily frustrated or demanding of services, not following through on your suggestions because their depression is taking over and they have a “why bother” attitude or they feel already overwhelmed, or they are hyper-focused on something that to you seems minor

#4. Use active listening as your default response.

When family members are upset, when they are demanding or frustrated, it’s easy for you to get defensive – begin explaining why or why you can’t do x. Again, because they are emotional their rational brains are literally shut down and they are unable to process what you are actually saying, anything you say is like gasoline on a fire. They will only hear your defensive tone, which in turn will only escalate their reactions.

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You want to help put out the emotional fire not fuel it, and your first line of defense is simply listening: “It sounds like you’re frustrated;” “I understand you’re upset.” Sound sincere when saying this, and allow them the space to just vent. Don’t feed the fire, remain calm.

Eventually they will wind down and begin to calm down. Once they are, you can begin to talk about what you can do and can’t do, but keep your explanations short and clear, and offer to circle back and talk it more in a few hours. This gives you and them a chance to calm down further and by setting a time, let’s them know that they are not being brushed aside.

#5. Initiate regular contact.

Rather than waiting for families contact you – initiate calls and contacts – it’s often better for you to initiate regular contact with them – be proactive rather than reactive. This is helpful in two ways: One is that it helps the family manage their anxiety. Rather than having their anxiety build and them their contacting you in a panicky state, your regular contacts can catch problems before they are out of control and your reaching out helps lower their anxiety by their knowing that you have not forgotten them and their needs.

But the other reason is helpful for you: That by initiating the contacts, you are controlling the process. You are providing the support they need when you are best able to offer it, rather than feeling barraged by families and constantly working in a reactive mode. This is helpful for you to avoid your own burnout and anxiety.

The theme here is recognizing that unsettled times naturally create anxiety that in turn creates emotional challenges. Your best defense is a good offense, being proactive, knowing what you can control and what you can’t, taking care of you so you can offer that calm and steady support.

Robert Taibbi, LCSW has 45 years of experience as clinician and mental health director. He is the author of 11 books, over 300 articles, and writes an online column for Psychology Today entitled Fixing Families <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fixing-families>. He can be reached at <https://www.bobtaibbi.com/>.

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