

BATHEing the Heart

A guideline for supportive conversations

Not everyone has the training or the time to delve into a deep, healing discussion with a friend, colleague or family member who's dealing with something difficult. The following method can, however, allow you to connect in a way that allows the other person to feel seen, heard and supported – even empowered – in as little as a few minutes.

B for Background:

To connect with someone who is suffering, you must obviously find out first what happened to give them pain. This is what they will describe in answering the question, “What happened to you?” One need not go into details; in fact, just the opposite. What is important is to get to the gist of what happened by listening with as little interruption as possible for two minutes, but not much longer. If two minutes do not seem like much, you may be surprised to know that, on average, we normally interrupt each other much sooner than this! Still, allowing “only” two minutes also has a purpose. If you let the personal go on much longer, he or she is likely to get lost in details and you may never get to the heart of the matter. The essentials, after all, are never in the facts – they're in the feelings. Thus you must move on quickly to the second step, which is much more important.

A for Affect:

The question you should now raise is: “And how does that make you feel?” This may seem stilted to you, or embarrassingly obvious, but you'll be amazed what you'll learn. Then move onto the most important step of all.

T for Trouble:

The best way to avoid drowning in emotion is to dive down deep, to the bottom, the hardest place, to the core of suffering. That is the only place where we can give the kick that will bring us back to the surface. Once again, the question can seem discourteous or nosy, yet it is the most effective of all the questions: “And what troubles you the most now?” This question is magic because it helps focus the mind of the person in pain. He or she can start to pull their thoughts together around what hurts the most. Otherwise, left to wander, their mind may tend to fragment and feel overwhelmed.

H for Handling:

After giving voice to the emotions, you must capitalize on the energy that's concentrated on the principal source of the problem at that moment by asking, “And what helps you the most to handle this?” That question turns listeners' attention toward the resources around them that can help them to cope, to take charge.

Even when we see the people we love in their weakest moments, we must not underestimate their capacity to deal with the most difficult situations. What people often need most is help to get back on their feet, to collect their own resources. They usually do not need us to solve their

problems for them. Our role consists of simply being there, being present, instead of offering an array of solutions and clumsily taking on the other person's problem.

E for Empathy:

To finish this usually brief exchange, it's always useful to sincerely express the feelings you experienced as you listened to the other person. Pain is like a weight we carry around our neck. By talking about how you felt as you were listening to them, you are letting them know that you have shared their burden for a few minutes. At the end of the conversation, they will set out alone again with their heavy load. But because of those few minutes of carrying it together, they will feel a little less lonely on their path. They will know that someone truly cares about them and that they have an ally in their struggle. Usually, a few very simple words are enough. For example, "That must be hard for you." Or, "I felt sad, too, as I listened to you. I'm so sorry that this happened to you."



(BATHE is drawn from *The Fifteen Minute Hour: Practical Therapeutic Interventions in Primary Care*, by M. Stuart and J. Lieberman.)