South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

# Supporting someone under pressure

These days it seems like being "stressed" is a permanent state of being with everything going on: the current state of the world, changes at work, financial pressures. It can be overwhelming and, at times, exhausting.

> When someone is feeling overwhelmed, it is our task to share our calm, not join in on their chaos.

When someone is feeling overwhelmed, their levels of the stress hormone cortisol soars. They may be argumentative or seek escape from the situation. (You have heard of being in a state of fight or flight) They may freeze and seem helpless to do anything.

So, everyone can use a helping hand now and then. Knowing what to say to someone with high stress levels is tricky because everyone responds to stress differently. It's not a one-size-fits-all solution.

What might be helpful to communicate to someone feeling overwhelmed.

1. **"You're not alone."** Everyone one of us has been stressed at some point in our life. Sometimes the best thing you can do is just be there for them.

2. **"How can I help?" Does this exchange sound familiar** *You*: Can I help you with anything? *Them*: No, I'm ok. Thanks. *You*: Alright, let me know.

   Instead of asking ***if*** you can help, ask ***how*** you can help. This rephrases the question and makes it easier for them to see different ways you could be there for them.

3. **"It's ok to take a break."** Stress can make you think that you always have to be "ON". Sometimes you hit a point where you feel like you just need a break. An outside voice can be a reminder that it's ok to take a break.

4. **Your feelings are valid."** When you're stressed, one of the worst things that can happen is someone diminishing your feelings. Offer support without judgement. **Acknowledge the stress** It's important to make the stressed-out person feel "seen and heard,"

5. **We all need words of encouragement.** Words of encouragement can give us the motivation to keep going when times get tough.

6. **"I'm here if you want to talk."** Letting someone know that you're available to talk opens up a safe space for them to share what they're going through. Good listening is essential here not trying to "fix things for them".

**Things You Should Avoid Saying**

It's as vital to know what to avoid saying as well as knowing what you should say. Please try to avoid these phrases from your vocabulary.

**Everything Will Be Okay** These words sound supportive, but …. Even if eventually things will work out, it is not ok right now.

**We're All Stressed Out Right Now — Don't Make It Harder .** This is different than normalising stress. It is overgeneralizing saying *everyone* is stressed.

**Calm Down-** Has anyone in human history ever relaxed from the words “calm down”? Probably not.

- Telling someone to "Calm down!" can put them on the defensive, saying their reactions are the problem, even if this has some truth to it.

- Another problem is it gives no road map for putting anything into action. When someone is anxious or upset, they can't quickly turn these feelings off because someone tells them to.
- And if the person saying "calm down" sounds anything but calm themselves then they're likely just adding fuel to the fire.;

**More Helpful Things to Say Than "Calm Down"**

The next time you are tempted to tell someone to calm down, pause, take steps to slow down your *own* stress response and try out one of these other interventions instead.

**1. "I understand this is upsetting."** This shows immediate empathy, instead of making the person feel that there is something wrong with them. By validating the fact of their distress, you lessen the risk of feeling not understood and fosters a connection.

**2. "It's hard for me to talk with you when things feel this intense."** This can be a helpful thing to say when there is a heated argument, and you are passing the point of productive conversation. The key is to convey that you still *want* to talk, but that things feel potentially damaging in their current state. Do not use the phrase, though, as a threat that you will cut them off if they don't immediately calm down in which case it's just another way of saying "Calm down."

**3. "I am going to pause for a moment to slow things down."** This phrase can be helpful because it has the potential to model relaxation techniques. Pause, stretch, do breathing exercises. Even if they don't follow your lead, at least you know that you will be better able to deal with what is to come and to lead by example.

**4. "I'm here with you in this."** This is especially helpful in situations where people's "big feelings" are getting the best of them, For most human beings, it is profoundly comforting to know that you are not alone. So often, when someone is upset, we want to know the perfect thing to say, but equally important is how we listen and simply stay emotionally present for them.

**5. "How can I help us move through this?"** Very often, the idea of saying "calm down" holds appeal because it gives us a sense of moving forward. So, although "calm down" won't be likely to do the trick, you can still think about moving toward a solution. By offering your help, you once again are going for a spirit of connection rather than accusation or separation. Just make sure you speak it with an extra dose of patience, so that the person doesn't feel that the clock is ticking loudly in their ear, which will likely agitate them even more.

**6. Do You Need to Vent, or Would You Like Advice?** Sometimes, someone might need to get it all out, and asking this question indicates that you respect their emotions. Validating their feelings in this way can be soothing. Plus, coming off with advice when a person is in a frenzied state won’t work. This question opens up the door to let you help them, but it also demonstrates respect for their needs.

**The Bottom line**

Stress is a normal part of life. Yet at times it can be overwhelming. How are we suggesting we help each other when stress builds?

- **Be active in looking after your own well-being**
- **Be a role model of asking for support when *you* need it.**
- **Be there for each other.**
- **Listen**
- **Validate stress levels.**
- **Keep our goals and values forefront.**
- **And be careful we don’t join in on the moaning.**

There's evidence to suggest that chronic complaining rewires the brain to make future complaining more likely, and some neuroscientists have speculated that complaining may be contagious, due to a phenomenon known as emotional contagion (the same process by which yawning spreads).

Of course, we don't need studies to tell us how complaining makes us feel.

On the other hand, we also know how feeling supported and giving that support does within our nervous system.