



Steps of Emotion Coaching

Emotion coaching skills can support your loved one's emotional development and self-esteem. These skills can be used to prevent the development of mental health and relationship issues (including inappropriate peer orientation) and/or to support your loved one's ability to be able to regulate his or her own emotions as a way to reduce the need for substance use, eating disorders, cutting or to cope with stress, pain, anger or loss. These skills will be especially useful if your loved one is a super-feeler.

Step 1: Attend to the Emotion

Attend to your loved one's emotional experience by approaching the situation calmly and acknowledging the presence of emotion (essentially not ignoring the child's expression of emotion, whether subtle or obvious).

"I see that something is up."

"I can tell this is hard for you"

Step 2: Name It

Put into words the emotions (or range of emotions) that you think your loved one might possibly be experiencing. You may also help them to identify and describe the bodily felt sense that accompanies each named emotion.

"You look sad."

"You seem angry"

"You sound worried"

Step 3: Validate the Emotion

This is the most important and yet the most challenging of all of the steps of emotion coaching. It communicates: "I understand you and your unique experience."

Validating involves putting yourself in your loved one's shoes and conveying understanding of their experience as **they** are experiencing it. This involves imagining what the situation must be like for them. It is important to accept, allow, and validate emotions that are different from what you expected or that are hard for you to understand.

When validating, it is also very important to resist going for the bright side, explaining with logic or trying to help them to see the situation as you see it. If you can do this, you will be showing your loved one that you understand them (and their unique experience) and this will 1) improve your relationship, 2) encourage them to keep coming to you when things get tough and 3) help them to move forward from the emotional challenge.

When validating it is also very important to "speak the unspoken". Speaking the unspoken involves speaking that truth that you both know, but that neither of you want to say out loud.

"I can understand why you might feel sad. It really hurts to be excluded, especially when all of your friends are going to the party".

"It makes sense that you're feeling angry. This divorce has been a lot to cope with.

Step 4: Meet the Need

When meeting the emotional need, it is important to refer back to the basics of emotions. Each emotion has a corresponding need from the environment.

- Sadness: soothing, giving a hug
- Anger: helping to set and defend boundaries
- Fear: protecting from danger (we do not protect anxiety! A real danger must be involved)
- Anxiety: helping to confront the anxiety-provoking situation with love and support

"Come here. Let me give you a hug."

Emotion Coaching - The Brief Model

The brief model of emotion coaching involves a focus on Step 1) validation, and 2) Support (emotion and practical). Some caregivers have shared that they appreciate the brief version, especially in the early days when they are trying to become more comfortable with this new style of communication.

Step 1. Learning to Validate

The first skill of emotion coaching is to validate your loved one. You can do so by transforming “BUT to BECAUSE”. For example, when your loved one tells you they feel sad about missing out on a family event, rather than leading with a typical response like:

“I can understand why you might feel sad **but** there’s always next time”

You would first imagine **why** it would make sense for her to feel sad and then convey your understanding using the word “because” like:

“I can understand why you might feel sad **because** you know you’re going to miss out on the fun”

Validating your loved one’s emotional experience – even if you don’t personally agree – will have a calming effect for your loved one. In fact, validation is most effective when it involves at least three “because’s”. For example... “I can understand why you might feel sad **because** you know you’re going to miss out on the fun; and because you were really looking forward to this; and because you don’t know when you’ll have another opportunity”. You don’t need to use the word “because” each time, but it can help you to structure your validation until doing so becomes more natural.

If you want to increase the effectiveness of the skill of validation, when you communicate your statement using three “because’s”, match your loved one’s **tone and volume**. For example, if they are feeling blue, say it low and slow. If they are feeling angry, say it with energy (but not anger). Doing so will quite literally calm the emotional circuits in their brain.

Step 2: Support – Meet the Emotional Need

Once the other feels validated, you can then offer emotional support. Every emotion has a specific emotional need. If your loved one is sad, offer them comfort (e.g., a hug). If they feel angry, help them to communicate what it is they need (e.g., space, a boundary, to feel heard). If they feel shame or anxiety, you can now offer reassurance and practical support. That being said, our society is deeply conditioned to offer reassurance when someone shares with us that they are struggling in some way. Providing reassurance **WITHOUT** validation is ineffective, despite how often we feel pulled to do so. That said, when preceded by deep validation, reassurance is much more likely to have the desired effect.

Practical Tips

When using the steps of emotion coaching, the skill of validation is critical. It calms the brain and makes the other more open and flexible to comfort, reassurance, problem-solving – even redirection and limits. There will be times when you will notice that once you’ve deeply validated your loved one, meeting the emotional and practical need isn’t even necessary because they will feel calmer or will have figured out themselves what to do next. Be aware, however, that once you start to validate your loved one, they may initially react in the following ways:|

“Why are you talking to me like that? That’s weird.”

“You can’t possibly understand.”

“I’m not sad – I’m mad!”

Do not be discouraged by these types of responses. They are normal and to be expected when you initiate a new style of communication, especially if there is a history of strain in the relationship. In these instances, simply start over with validating anew. We call it “validation whack-a-mole” and it’s actually a great sign that your loved one is feeling heard and is willing to share with you more than what was initially on the surface. Keep using the validation script and be sure to communicate three “because’s” each time and the emotional storm will soon pass.

Shortcuts to Validation

Here are some helpful phrases to get you started. Communicating with your loved one may feel unnatural at first, but it is like exercising a new muscle and it will get easier with time.

I get why you would feel _____ because ...

I can see how that might make you feel _____ because ...

It makes sense that you're feeling _____ because ...

I can only imagine how difficult this must be because... because ...

No wonder you're _____ because ...

I can understand why you might feel _____ because ...

"This is so _____" because ...