

## Using Validation and Support: Tips and Tricks for Emotion-Focused Communication

“Emotions go up like an elevator but the door to reason is on the ground floor.  
Emotion coaching can get you there.” Dr. Adele Lafrance

A core skill in Emotion-Focused Family Therapy, emotion-focused communication (validation + support) is regarded as a widely effective strategy for supporting the behavioral and emotional well-being of children, adolescents and adults. It can be used as an ‘in the moment’ technique to connect with your loved one, redirect behavior, respond to stress or distress, and even avoid or de-escalate outbursts. It can also be used to support the development of emotional health in general, no matter the age of the person with whom you are engaging. But how does it work? Relating to your loved one using the principles and skills of emotion-focused communication - and in particular validation and support - activates growth enhancing chemistry in the brain that leads to stronger connections between regions of the brain involved in the regulation of emotions. Therefore, by experiencing the steps of emotion-focused communication repeatedly, and over time, your loved one will develop the capacity to manage their own emotions as well as experiencing fewer episodes of overwhelm, reduced engagement in behaviors, including symptoms to cope, and reduced need to connect with others for reassurance in order to feel ok.

### Steps of Emotion-Focused Communication

Ready to begin? First things first – check in with yourself. Are you calm? If not, take a breath. Seriously. The breath is like the brain’s remote control. It’s definitely a powerful, yet undervalued resource that is readily available and will make it easier for you to engage in the steps of validation + support outlined below.

#### Step 1. Learning to Validate

The first skill of emotion-focused communication is to learn to validate your loved one’s experience. 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 experience – even if you don't personally agree – will have a calming effect for your loved one. In fact, validation can be 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.

Though we've provided an example of the skill of validation in response to an emotion (sadness), you can use the skill of validation to respond to a number of experiences:

- Emotions & Emotional States (sadness, anger, shame, loneliness, etc)
- Attitudes (There's no point; This is stupid)
- Urges (I want to quit / cut / do drugs)
- Behaviors (disruptive behaviors / aggression)
- States (silence / overwhelm / fatigue)

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 hopeless, 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 2a: Support – Meet the Emotional Need

Once the other feels validated, you can then offer emotional support. 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. When preceded by deep validation, however, reassurance is much more likely to have the desired effect.

### Step 2b: Support – Meet the Practical Need

Finally it's time for problem-solving! When faced with our loved one's stress or distress, most of us want to move right to “fixing it”. However, if you skip over the steps above, you are likely going to experience resistance to your efforts to solve the emotional problem. Your loved one may also get frustrated, perhaps feeling like you aren't listening. And so the order in which you move through these steps is critical. Validation creates openness, so that the emotional support



sentences and the practical support suggestions can be heard, even integrated. In other words, only after you've validated and offered emotional support do you then support your loved one practically.

In the beginning, we strongly encourage you to use the Script-Builder below to structure your responses until you become fluent in this novel way of relating to your loved ones.

### **Practical Tips**

When using the steps of emotion-focused communication, 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. 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 script-builder and building in the micro-skills. Focus on the elaboration of three “because” each time and the emotional storm will soon pass. Sometimes by the time you get to the Practical Support step, no more is needed.

A final note: This method has been used across a variety of ages – with infants to the elderly – and across a variety of situations and health and mental health conditions. We have found – and consistently – that the factors most predictive of a positive outcome include practice and persistence. Getting feedback from someone skilled in the approach can also be invaluable, especially in the early days as you develop and strengthen your skill and confidence.



## EFFT – Emotion-Focused Communication Script-Builder

### Step 1 - Validate

A. Make an effort to convey understanding of their experience (from their point of view):

- I could understand you...
- I could imagine you...
- No wonder you...
- It would make sense that you...
- I could never understand but when I try to put myself in your shoes, I can imagine you...

When I put myself in your shoes I could imagine you might feel/think/want to/not want to \_\_\_\_\_

B. Demonstrate your effort using because-statements grounded in tentativeness and sincerity, reflecting the underlying vulnerability of the other, their goodness, their positive intentions and/or attempts for relief from stress/distress: because 1: \_\_\_\_\_ because 2: \_\_\_\_\_ because 3: \_\_\_\_\_

### Example:

I could understand you might feel \_\_\_\_\_ because #1, because #2 and because #3, OR

No wonder you want to \_\_\_\_\_ because #1, because #2 and because #3, OR

It would make sense that you might not want to \_\_\_\_\_ because #1, because #2 and because #3

### Step 2 - Support

A: Emotional support ideas

- Comfort (a hand, a hug or loving words)
- Reassurance (“It’s going to be ok”)
- Communication of positive regard (“I know you are doing the best you can right now”)
- Communication of belief in the other (“I believe in you; “I believe you can do this”)
- Communication of togetherness (“We’re in this together”; “I want the best for you too”)

B: Practical support ideas

- Proceed with or propose plan / intervention / treatment; state behavioral expectation(s)
- Share information or skills
- Offer solutions to solve the practical problem or take over to solve the problem
- Set a limit
- Space\* (space can be physical or psychological *and* time-limited in that the plan for reconnection must be clearly communicated)
- N/A (sometimes, once the other is validated and supported emotionally, no more is required)



## EFFT Emotion-Focused Communication: Practicing with Scripts

### 1. I want to \_\_\_\_\_

It makes sense to me that you would want to \_\_\_\_\_ because:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Emotional support sentence:

Practical support suggestion:

### 2. I don't want to \_\_\_\_\_

I can imagine why you wouldn't want to \_\_\_\_\_ because:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Emotional support sentence:

Practical support suggestion:

### 3. I feel so \_\_\_\_\_

No wonder you feel so \_\_\_\_\_ because:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Emotional support sentence:

Practical support suggestion:

### 4. Why are you trying to talk to me like that? (said after you've gone through the steps of EC)

I can understand why you'd react in this way to what I'm saying because:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Emotional support sentence:

Practical support suggestion:

