



A guide for supporting distressed patients and relatives

The Maguire Communication Skills Training Unit understands that during the COVID-19 pandemic, health and social care staff are having increasingly difficult conversations with distressed patients and relatives.

The Maguire Unit has developed a number of resources to support colleagues at this time. We are all aware that communicating with compassion is key for our patients and relatives to feel supported.

This leaflet, focussing on supporting distressed patients and relatives, has been

designed as an easy access reference tool offering examples of skills and phrases which could be applied to patient/relative/carer interactions. This resource has been developed based on the content of specialist, evidence based, learning resources developed by the Maguire Communication Skills Unit.

The most important thing to remember is that empathy alone will help a distressed person feel cared for and listened to. It is the most helpful skill you can use.

EMPATHY can help to de-escalate strong emotions very quickly.
Three steps to empathise.

1. Notice the emotion – **HEAR IT**
2. Verbally name what you can hear at the level you hear it – **NAME IT AND PAUSE**
3. Allow the person to confirm or state how they are feeling – **CHECK IT**

EG- "I can hear how stressful this is already and that this is something else to deal with, you sound very worried" **PAUSE Patient -** "I am ... I don't think my husband can cope with any more stress, he's so worried about me..."

or

EG- "You sound furious about this..." **PAUSE Patient -** "Yes but it's not you, it's a lot of other things I'm dealing with too..."

Handling Emotions

It is important to acknowledge the person's emotion by naming it (say it) at the level you hear it. Only when the emotion has been named (recognised and acknowledged by you and the person) will they begin to feel less emotionally distressed.

"I can hear you are upset and it's because..." (repeat what you have heard as fully as possible).

"You sound really frustrated about this." PAUSE to hear the reason.

"I can hear how upset you are about this situation... you have a lot of worries. It sounds overwhelming."

If a referral for psychological support is appropriate ***"Could I have permission to ask the (specialist nurse/other) to contact you to look at how best we can support you?"***

Apologise appropriately – an apology, even if the circumstances are beyond our control, acknowledges the distress in a helpful way without accepting blame or taking responsibility.

BUT

Resist giving reasons/justifications unless specifically asked. Reasons may be related to system failures, available beds for admissions, staffing and COVID-19 issues etc. However knowing this, is rarely helpful or useful information.

If the patient is crying or upset

Say something like:

"I can see/hear how upset you are and can only apologise for the distress and worry this change/delay has caused you."

"I can hear how distressed you are. Can you bear to tell me what's going through your mind?" or "Are you able to tell me what you are thinking?"

These are strategies which may help the patient to talk and the tears to lessen.

"We will be back in touch as soon as possible" or "I will look at how you can be supported more fully with this."

Note. Only give an explanation if a patient asks for one. It may come across as justification otherwise the simpler the explanation the better.

Handling Emotions

Remember **ANGER** is an expression of distress.

Do not take anger personally even if it feels like it is directed at you. You may hear a raised voice, shouting or swearing.

ACKNOWLEDGE – Name the emotion at the level you hear it – “I can hear how angry you are... can you say what is making you so angry?”

The person may be angry about what has happened, or is about to happen. They are not angry with you. **EMPATHISE AND PAUSE**

STOP – Resist giving an explanation or information unless asked for, it can feel like a justification and appear defensive and can escalate emotions, especially anger.

ALLOW the person to explain why they are angry – **EMPATHISE**

If the person has mentioned wanting to make a formal complaint.

Acknowledge the strength of their feelings in a supportive way:

“I can hear you feel strongly about this, and want to make a complaint. The team in PALS will guide you and the number is...”

“Again, I am extremely sorry that this has happened and you have suffered as a consequence. Thank you for talking to me about this.”

Referring for additional emotional psychological support.

Have information on support services to hand, these services may be within the organisation as well as external services.

If an explanation is requested, say something like:

“Unfortunately due to circumstances beyond our control we are unable to carry out the procedure/treatment/test – every effort is being made to keep you informed and supported in the meantime.”

Ideas to respond helpfully to questions that may be difficult to answer.

It is always important to acknowledge the question/s even if you are unable to answer them, as well as acknowledging how important the question/answer is to the person who has asked it.

Challenging questions from the patient may be about impact on health or outcome of treatment. Questions such as:

1

"Is this going to make a difference to when I start my treatment?"

2

"How will this affect me in the future?"

3

"When can my treatment re-start?"

Although these are really important questions for the patient you may not be able to or even expected to answer them definitively. More important is to acknowledge the question as a worry or concern.

Don't feel under pressure to answer questions outside your role or responsibility.

Helpful responses to any questions you are unable to answer include:

1

"I can hear you are wondering if this will affect the start of treatment. What thoughts are you having?"

2

"It sounds like you have worries or concerns about how this may affect you. Am I right?... Can I ask you what those worries/concerns are?"

3

"I can hear you want to know exactly when your treatment will re-start, and how worrying not knowing and waiting is for you. Unfortunately I do not have an exact date to give you today. I am very sorry I can't give you something more specific."