

‘TACT— SAYING THE RIGHT THING’

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As we all know, trying to be nice is no labor of love. We want to be able to say the right thing and in order to do this we must develop a conceptual framework that guides our interactions with people and bring our anxiety down to at least manageable levels. We must identify people’s characteristics in a positive way, define their own role, and develop a conceptual framework that makes their behavior somewhat predictable. Most people are capable of handling life’s crises and are surrounded by some sort of supportive network. It is only some current crisis that will temporarily place them in a situation we will have to deal with. We may not agree with the coping techniques they choose or approve of the people whom they choose to receive support— but we must respect and accept their choice. We must trust that they can handle their problems in a fashion appropriate to their own lives and values - not to ours. A person approached in this way maintains self—respect.

Tone of voice is very important, but just as important is the body language used to convey the message. We need to come close to the person, but not so close as to invade his or her space. Generally, in the United States, an acceptable distance is two to three feet. Coming too close can increase anxiety, but being too far away can also inhibit any meaningful interaction. If we seem to tower above them, we may be perceived as inaccessible to them. A person is more likely to respond to us if we are at eye level or below it. By being aware and in control of our body language, we can use it skillfully to provide comfort and support.

A common reaction to loss of control is to blame ourselves or others. We respond with anger. Sometimes the anger’s connection to the loss is obvious; in other situations, the anger is redirected. In both cases we must remember that our commitment to being nonjudgmental means that we will not respond defensively. As defensive as we may feel, we must remember the emotional pain being felt by the person. Focus on that and acknowledge the feelings in one of these ways:

- “You’re really angry about that.”
- “I know you’re pretty upset right now.”
- “I know it’s frustrating to

Comments like these will permit the individual to expand on his or her feelings and, in doing so, to discharge them. After listening, if there is something that can be done to help the person restore control, then by all means, we should do it and let them know our intentions.

We, who are “helpers”, are usually very uncomfortable with depression. It is a hurt and we want to make it better. But, as difficult as it may be, we must remind ourselves that the person’s depression has a function and we would be wrong to

try to “undo” it. We would also be wrong to belittle this feeling of depression or give the person a pat answer. As with the other phases of grief, acknowledgment of the feeling is appropriate. Using body language that says “I’m interested in you and willing to talk if you wish,” can also be helpful. Sometimes just allowing the person time alone to think things through will give them an opportunity to work through the grief and be able to address the loss with a more balanced view. We must avoid trying to balance it for the person by making statements like, “but you’ll be able to..” or “You’ve got to look on the bright side.” No human being has the power to change another’s feelings.

Remember base your approach to people on:

- A belief in the person’s ability to solve their own problems.
- A nonjudgmental approach.
- Understanding the person as griever.
- Using broad, open—ended questions.
- Acknowledgment of feelings.
- Using appropriate body language.
- Avoidance of pat answers.

These attitudes in themselves do not guarantee that a helper’s interaction with the person will truly be helpful. But combined with love, such attitudes give us the courage to reach out and touch those whom we seek to help and, having touched their lives, the wisdom to allow our friends to grow. With that wisdom, we can also finally realize that there is no right thing to say.