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• **A TOOLKIT FOR FAMILIES** •



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Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



COMMUNICATION & PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS



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BRITISH COLUMBIA SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY

MODULE 3

Module 3: Communication and Problem-Solving Skills

When a family member has a mental or substance use disorder, it is important to take the time to learn about the disorder. By educating oneself as much as possible about the mental or substance use disorder, family members can take an active role in their loved one's recovery. The Family Toolkit was designed to assist families in caring for a family member with a mental or substance use disorder by providing information and practical resources. This toolkit consists of five learning modules. Module 3 provides practical skill training in effective communication and problem-solving. The other four modules in the Family Toolkit are:

- Module 1:** *Understanding Mental and Substance Use Disorders*
- Module 2:** *Supporting Recovery from a Mental or Substance Use Disorder*
- Module 4:** *Caring for Oneself and Other Family Members*
- Module 5:** *Children and Youth in the School System*

For more information on the Family Toolkit and how it can be used, please read the *Introduction to Family Toolkit* available from BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information at www.heretohelp.bc.ca. Families are also encouraged to seek out books, articles, videos and organizations that can further assist them in learning more about the specific disorder(s) that affect their family member.

About Us

B.C. Schizophrenia Society is proud to be affiliated with HeretoHelp. HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, a group of non-profit agencies providing good-quality information to help individuals and families maintain or improve their mental well-being. The BC Partners members are AnxietyBC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Institute of Families for Child and Youth Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy eating disorders prevention and awareness (a Family Services of the North Shore program) and Mood Disorders Association of BC (a branch of Lookout Housing and Health Society). The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. For more information, visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca



Acknowledgements and Thanks

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information gratefully acknowledges the following persons and organizations who helped in the production of this toolkit. Eileen Callanan, Martin and Marianne Goerzen who so kindly offered valuable comments on early drafts. Sharon Scott, editor of the Family-to-Family Newsletter for the use of their quotes from their Fall 2003 issue. All the families who shared their stories so others would benefit. Julie Ward for permitting the inclusion of her mood charts for children. Dugald Stermer for providing permission to use his illustration "Through the Ages" free of charge. Kayo Devcic, Alcohol and Drug Counsellor, Vancouver School Board. Dolores Escudero, Mental Health Consultant, Provincial Services Division, Child and Youth Mental Health Policy and Program Support, Ministry of Children and Family Development.

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Funding for this project was provided by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of PHSA.

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Communication should include consideration of whether we are responding with sensitivity to the well-being of the person who is receiving our message.

The Importance of Effective Communication

Good communication is an important skill that helps families cope with the challenges of mental and substance use disorders by enhancing relationships between the person with the disorder, their health care providers and their family. Sometimes communicating with a family member who has a mental or substance use disorder can be extremely difficult, especially when the disorder affects the person's ability to think clearly or concentrate. Talking about sensitive topics is difficult at the best of times, but when a mental or substance use disorder is involved, family members often have a range of expectations and emotions which can make communicating clearly even more of a challenge.

The goal of this section is to provide families with the skills they need to discuss their thoughts, feelings, needs and problems constructively and successfully. This will help to ensure that issues are discussed and that action is taken to resolve problems. These communication techniques are useful for everyone in the family including the person with the mental or substance use disorder.

Family members may find that they are already using the communication strategies discussed in this section, which means they are on the right track towards establishing strong communication with their loved one.

Good communication can help:

- **Express concerns and worries about a family member in a non-threatening way**
- **Reduce the risk of relapse by creating a positive environment at home**
- **Enhance communication with professionals involved in the persons's care in order to resolve problems**
- **Clarify what each member of the family can do to help facilitate recovery**

Effective communication takes time, practice and cooperation.

Elements of Effective Communication

Ideal communication, especially when a mental or substance use disorder is involved, should consist of these elements:

- Clear communication - this will increase the likelihood that the intended message is received.
- Willingness to listen to the concerns and worries of family members.
- Use of language that is understandable to all persons involved.

When a family member has a mental or substance use disorder, effective communication is even more important than usual. A person can experience stress when they have difficulty understanding what is said or what is expected of them. It can also be stressful when there are many arguments or too much criticism in the household. Stress is a common trigger for relapse, so it is critical to reduce stress whenever possible.

Guidelines for Effective Communication

- Use short, clear, and specific statements, which are easier to understand and answer. Long involved explanations may be difficult to follow, as some mental disorders make concentrating difficult.
- Cover one topic at a time; give one direction at a time. By keeping communication focused, it is easier to follow the conversation, which can be especially challenging for someone with a mental or substance use disorder.
- Try to avoid using a loud voice, making accusations or applying criticism, as this can be very stressful for someone with a mental or substance use disorder.
- If the person appears withdrawn and uncommunicative, take a break or return to the conversation at another time. Achieving the desired response is more likely when the person is more open to talking.
- The person may have difficulty remembering what has been said, therefore instructions and directions may need to be repeated.
- Be pleasant, but firm. By not undermining what is being expressed and making one's position clear, the other person is less likely to misinterpret the message.
- If the discussion turns into an argument, everyone involved in the discussion should agree to call a 'time-out.' It can be helpful to take a few deep breaths or go for a short walk, then return to the discussion.
- Listen carefully to what the other person is saying. Acknowledge their point of view and their feelings.

Try not to blame yourself or your family member for the mental or substance use disorder.

Remember, mental and substance use disorders are illnesses just like diabetes or high blood pressure.

Expressing Oneself Clearly

Below are some examples of ambiguous communications. In the column beside, there are examples of clearer, more concrete language.

Ambiguous	Clearer
"You are inconsiderate."	"I would like you to clean up after you make a snack."
"I need more independence."	"I would like to go out with my friends on the weekend."
"We don't communicate enough."	"I would like if we could talk about our plans for this weekend."
"I wish you'd be more attentive."	"I would like if you would put down what you're doing and listen to me."
"You do a lot around here."	"I'm grateful that you do the cooking and look after the children when they come home from school."

Suggestions for Making Clear Statements:

- Use short statements or questions
- Make one request at a time
- Be as specific as possible. For example, focus on a behaviour rather than making a generalization
- Avoid using highly negative statements

Eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expression are important nonverbal behaviours that contribute to effective communication.

Some mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, affect a person's ability to understand nonverbal communication.

Our relationships with people are affected by their behaviour. We can all benefit from respectful feedback about how our behaviours and actions affect those around us.

Acknowledging a positive action or attitude has two benefits:

- 1 It lets your family member know that the positive action has been noticed and appreciated**
- 2 It makes it more likely that the positive action will be done again**

Communication Is Both Verbal and Nonverbal

It is important to be aware of how nonverbal communication is used in conversation. In some situations, a person's words may convey one message, while their nonverbal actions communicate something quite different. A common example is when a person says "Oh, that's just great!" while indicating through their body language or expression that they aren't happy. For effective communication, a person's nonverbal messages should be congruent with their words.

When listening to others, it is always important to listen to the whole message and try to understand the overall communication. For example, a person may verbally agree that they will do something, but their reluctance is expressed nonverbally. This indicates that the person may feel obligated to say "yes." In this case, a follow-up may be necessary to explore and understand the reasons why the person is reluctant.

Communication Skills

One important aspect of communicating with a loved one with a mental or substance use disorder is conveying how their behavior affects other people. How these messages are framed influences how they are received by the person. Framing includes qualities such as tone of voice and choice of words.

Communicating Praise

Praise involves communicating positive feelings for a specific behaviour. By letting other people know which behaviours are appreciated it is possible to encourage them to engage in more of those behaviours. In addition, people with mental and substance use disorders sometimes struggle with their self-esteem and hearing that they have done something well can help build self-esteem. Acknowledging small accomplishments is important. At times of stress and discouragement, this can help the person to keep making efforts, even when progress is very slow. When expressing appreciation for someone's behaviour:

- 1 Look at the person**
- 2 Using a friendly tone of voice, say exactly what behaviour is appreciated**
- 3 Tell the person how it made you feel**

It is important to be specific about the behaviour that is appreciated. Being vague makes it difficult for the person to know exactly what they did that was positive. Consider the examples below:

Vague

"I thought what you did yesterday was wonderful."

Specific

"Helping the boys with their homework yesterday was very nice of you. It made me proud."

Expressing Negative Feelings

Inevitably, no matter how well people get along with each other, certain behaviours can become irritating. Constructive expression of negative feelings provides feedback to others about how their behaviour affects those around them. If family members don't express their feelings about the behaviour, their loved one will never know their behaviour is annoying. By expressing feelings in a constructive way, family members can avoid bottling up emotions or expressing them in a hurtful way.

Negative feelings can be difficult to express— family members may be worried it will hurt the other person or they may fear their reaction. How feelings are expressed is just as important as the message itself.

It is possible to provide constructive feedback about actions that affect others negatively:

- 1 **Look at the person**
- 2 **Speak firmly (but not harshly)**
- 3 **Specify the behaviour**
- 4 **Tell the person how it made you feel**
- 5 **Suggest how the person might prevent this from happening in the future (or suggest a problem-solving discussion)**

Try to communicate negative feelings when the problem behaviour occurs. Don't wait until later unless it is impossible to be calm and clear in the moment.

Focusing on precise behaviours reduces the risk of overgeneralization, for example:

Overgeneralized

"You're the messiest person I've ever had to live with."

Specific

"I felt frustrated when you left your dishes on the counter. It would be helpful if you would put them in the dishwasher."

It also avoids threatening or nagging communication which is seldom effective. Threatening or nagging can evoke an angry response which is likely to further reduce the chances that the person will change their behaviour. Below are some examples of threatening or nagging messages which should be avoided.

Avoid nagging messages:

"If you want to continue living here, you'd better get the kitchen cleaned up."

"When are you going to clean up the kitchen? I've asked you over and over again but you still haven't done it."

Examples of Expressing Negative Feelings Constructively

"I felt angry when you shouted at me before dinner. I'd appreciate if you would speak quieter next time."

"I'm sorry to hear that you did not get the course you wanted. Let's sit down after dinner and discuss some other possibilities."

"I get very anxious when you tell me I should be going out more. It would help me if you didn't nag me about it."

When someone does something that makes you feel sad or angry, let them know in a calm, non-critical way. Do not assume that the other person will guess or that they 'should' know how you feel.

Communication of negative feelings works best when it is accompanied by:

a) A request for a different behaviour.

Again, it is important to be specific about the behaviour. A request is more likely to be successful if it is phrased in a polite way that emphasizes how much it would be appreciated, rather than using a demanding or 'nagging' tone.

Example:

"It irritates me when you play your music loudly. I would appreciate it if you would play your stereo at a lower volume."

People with mental or substance use disorders can be particularly sensitive to harsh and critical voice tones. Tone of voice may put the person on the defensive. They may be less likely to hear what is being said and less likely to try to do what is being asked of them.

OR

b) A request for a problem-solving discussion.

Whenever possible, it is often more successful if the problem can be resolved jointly. If the other person feels like they have a say in the issue, they are more likely to work on behaving differently.

Example:

"It bothers me how much you sit at home and watch TV. I have suggested that you try to go out for a while but you don't seem to want to do that. I'd like to have a discussion about this and see if we can come up with a plan to find other activities for you to do."

Tips for Effective Communication

- Listen attentively
- Ask questions and invite questions
- Provide feedback to your family member and ask for feedback from them
- Be tolerant of others
- Be honest
- Demonstrate respect by being open
- Clarify your own ideas before communicating
- Communicate purposely—focus on your real message
- Consider the timing, setting and social climate
- Acknowledge your family member's perspective and explain your own perspective
- Be aware of your tone and facial expressions
- Show empathy; put yourself in the other person's shoes
- Use humour when appropriate
- Look for common goals

"I" Messages

The "I Message" is a basic communication tool that can be used to express negative feelings or make a request. It is a simple method of clearly communicating needs to another person that clearly expresses how their behaviour is affecting others.

The "I Message" works like this:

I _____, when you _____.

Examples:

- I feel irritated, when you criticize me.
- I feel relieved, when you take your medication.
- I get scared, when you raise your voice.
- I worry, when you come home late.

LEAP

Developed by Dr. Amador, LEAP® ("Listen-Empathize-Agree-Partner®") is an effective system for communicating and collaborating to solve problems with a family member who has a mental and substance use disorder. It can be particularly helpful for communicating with a family member who lacks awareness of their disorder, a symptom known as anosognosia. The four steps of LEAP are:

Listen: Listen to try to understand what the person is telling you about themselves and their experiences. Reflect back what you have heard, without your opinions and ideas.

Empathize: Empathize with how the person feels about their experiences and symptoms (without necessarily agreeing with their view of reality; e.g. "That sounds scary. Do you feel frightened?").

Agree: Find areas of agreement, especially goals you both want (e.g. to stay out of the hospital).

Partner: Collaborate to work toward agreed upon goals.

For more information and videos about LEAP, visit the LEAP Institute website at leapinstitute.org

Dr. Amador used LEAP® to communicate with his brother, who had schizophrenia, and help him accept treatment.

Anosognosia is a common symptom of some mental disorders including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. It describes a severe lack of awareness of the disorder experienced by the person with mental disorder. The person is not simply in denial, rather they cannot understand that they are ill.

Listening

Effective communication requires good listening. Listening is not just about hearing the message correctly, but also interpreting it in the way it was intended by the speaker. Practicing effective listening skills can help family members better understand the thoughts, feelings and experiences of their loved one. It also helps the person feel heard and understood, which breaks down the isolation often experienced by those with mental and substance use disorders.

Attentive Listening

Two important features of listening are:

- **Paying attention to the person speaking**
- **Ensuring that one understands what the person is saying**

Often there are competing demands for a person's attention that make it difficult to listen attentively. For example, when a person is trying to have a conversation with a family member, but is also distracted by preparing dinner, texting or driving. It's important to regularly set aside time to give the other person one's undivided attention.

Verbal and nonverbal feedback greatly enhances communication. Eye contact, alert facial expression, head nods and verbal affirmations (like "uh-huh" or "I see") let the speaker know that the listener is paying attention and understands what they are trying to say. Imagine trying to talk with someone who looks away, doesn't say anything or shows no expression on their face – how would someone else know they are listening?

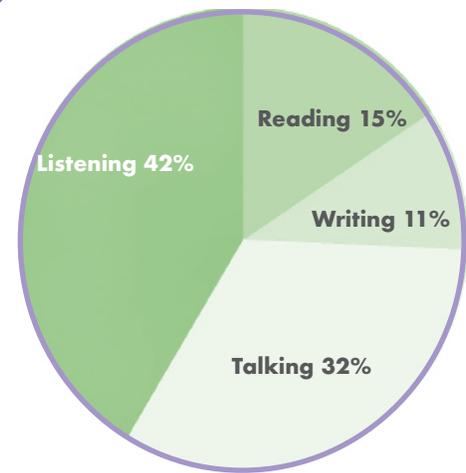
Demonstrate attentive listening through these five steps:

- 1 Look at the person talking**
- 2 Attend to what they are saying**
- 3 Indicate to the person that you are listening (e.g., Nod your head, say "Uh-huh")**
- 4 Ask clarifying questions if you don't understand. Identify areas where you need more information**
- 5 Clarify what you heard by paraphrasing or summarizing what the person said.**

Set aside a time each day that is devoted to talking with your family member. Find a place to talk where there are no distractions.

Paraphrasing is particularly helpful when you are giving or listening to a set of instructions. Asking the listener to repeat back the instructions not only helps to ensure they heard it correctly but may also help them remember the instructions.

Average Time Spent in Communication



Attentive listening can help facilitate discussion of a problem or other important family issues.

Listening Can Be Enhanced By:

- **Repeating the message back to confirm it was heard correctly**
- **Reducing noise in the environment (e.g., radio or television) or distractions that take our attention away from listening to the person**
- **Being aware that physical or mental fatigue can interfere with our ability to listen**

Reflective Listening

Reflective listening involves reflecting back to the speaker what the listener heard them say by paraphrasing or summarizing their message to ensure it was heard correctly. This may include checking that the other person has interpreted their feelings accurately. Asking questions for clarification or to get more information is also an important part of reflective listening.

The goal is to focus on understanding the point of view of the other person, rather than trying to give advice or change their beliefs. If a person feels listened to and understood, they may be more willing to continue talking and listen to what others would like to say.

Here are some suggested responses to use during reflective listening:

- If I heard you correctly, you said ... Did I get that right?
- If I understand you, you're telling me that ... Is that right?
- Let me see if I have this right. Are you saying that ...?
- So, if I heard you right, you see yourself as ... or you see the situation as ... Is that right?
- I hear you saying "...". Can you tell me more about that?
- If I understand you correctly, ... I can understand why you feel/want ...

An Example of Listening

While you're reading this scenario, consider how Susan is responding to Emily. Is she listening attentively, or not? How would you rate this listener? What could she have done differently?

It's Thursday night and Susan has arrived home late from the office. Everyone is starving and she's frantically trying to make dinner. Her daughter Emily walks into the kitchen.

"Hi, how was your day?" Susan asks, while reading a recipe. She reviews the ingredient list in her mind and realizes that she doesn't have all the ingredients.

"I need to talk to you about something," responds Emily. "I'm feeling pretty anxious about this test tomorrow. It's worth a lot of my grade and I don't feel I understand the material,"

"Uh huh." Susan also realizes the recipe won't work because it needs to marinate overnight. She flips through the cookbook to find another recipe.

"I've re-read the chapters over and over but it's not staying in my head. I'm worried that I'll fail the course if I don't do well on this test."

"Yeah, uh huh, I'm sure you'll do fine." Susan thinks to herself, "There's gotta be something else I can make for dinner tonight."

"Well I guess I'll go read over my notes one more time."

"That's a good idea honey. I'll call you when dinner's ready."

Some Barriers to Listening

Listening requires separating the communication from the background noise of the environment. Avoid letting distractions interfere with communication by turning off the television or radio, putting phones on silent or finding a quiet place to talk.

Some barriers are internal rather than external. A person may bring preconceived ideas of what they think the speaker will say to the conversation, which causes them to ignore what the speaker is actually saying. As a result, they may respond back based on their assumption of what the person is going to say or they may interrupt before the person has had a chance to complete their thought. This can be avoided by setting aside any preconceptions and listening attentively to the other person's message.

Sometimes, people are so focused on formulating their response to the other person that they forget to listen to what the other person is really saying. Focus on listening and understanding their message first.

Lengthy discussion or the addition of irrelevant issues can reduce focus on the conversation. Try to stick to one issue at a time. If the discussion seems to be going nowhere, it may be best to come back to it at a later time when both parties are more refreshed.

Listening Is Often an Underdeveloped Skill

Test your listening ability in the next conversation you have. As the person speaks, focus on remembering the essential information being shared by the speaker. After they have finished talking, summarize back to them what you heard. Ask the person whether the summary is correct and clarify if necessary.

Suggestions for Increasing Your Ability to Listen

Focus on the message, not you think the person will say.

This helps to avoid prejudging the message, based on our feelings towards the speaker, who they are, or what we expect them to say.

Focus on their thoughts, not your own thoughts.

This helps you focus on their message, rather than your response.

Supportive listening is listening with the purpose of helping the other person. Understanding the message correctly is still important, however, it also requires the ability to listen and respond empathetically. Paying attention to the other person's emotions is a key part of supportive listening.

Supportive Listening Skills

Often someone may be called upon to help another person with a concern or problem they are having. Their main role in this situation is to act as a sounding board for that person by letting them talk through their concern.

The goal of supportive listening is to assist the person with their problem or concern by being present for them and ensuring they feel heard. In this way, the person is able to talk through their problem and come up with their own solutions.

Some Qualities of Supportive Listening

- **Being attentive**
- **Listening with empathy —not trying to solve the problem**
- **Encouraging the person to explore the problem and possible solutions thoroughly—let them talk their way to the solution**
- **Listening to the emotions associated with the problem**

Empathy

Empathy is an important quality in interactions with others, particularly family members and close friends. Being empathetic means being able to put oneself in the shoes of the other person and appreciate their experience from their perspective or frame of reference. It is the ability to understand, be sensitive to and care about the feelings of the other person. Empathy doesn't mean always agreeing with what the other person is saying, rather it means letting them know that their feelings are acknowledged and valued. Showing empathy can help encourage a person to open up about their feelings, worries and concerns.

How well do you communicate with your family members? Sometimes it is easier to communicate with friends, colleagues and strangers than it is with our own family.

You can use the worksheet on the next page to help you identify your positive communication habits, as well as which communication skills you may want to improve on.

Worksheet: Assess Your Communication Skills

For each of the following items, assess your skill level by giving yourself a rating between 1 (low) and 5 (high). Ratings of 3 or less suggest skills you may want to work on.

1 Never **2** Rarely **3** Sometimes **4** Usually **5** Always

- I am a good listener and seldom miss what others are saying to me.
- I am easily able to read others' nonverbal communication.
- I can manage conflicts with other people without too much difficulty.
- I am able to find the appropriate words for expressing myself.
- I check with the other person to see if they have understood me correctly.
- I share my personal thoughts and experiences when it's appropriate.
- When I am wrong, I am not afraid to admit it.
- I find it easy to give compliments to others.
- I tend to pick up on how people are feeling.
- I generally try to put effort into understanding the other person's point of view.
- I make an effort to not let my negative emotions get in the way of a meaningful conversation.
- I am comfortable expressing my opinions.
- I make an effort to compliment others when they do something that I appreciate.
- When I have the impression that I might have harmed someone's feelings, I apologize.
- I try not to become defensive when I am being criticized.
- I check with others to ensure that I have been understood.
- When uncomfortable about speaking to someone, I speak directly rather than using hints.
- I try not to interrupt when someone else is speaking.
- I show interest in what people are saying through my comments and facial expressions.
- When I don't understand a question or idea, I ask for additional explanation.
- I try not to jump to conclusions before a person has finished speaking.
- I look directly at people when they are speaking.
- I listen attentively, not letting my thoughts wander when others are speaking.
- I do not find it difficult to ask people to help me with tasks.
- I express my opinions directly but not forcefully.
- I am able to speak up for myself.
- I try not to interpret what someone else is saying but rather ask questions that help clarify.

Dealing with Communication Problems

Confused or Unclear talk

If the person is not expressing their ideas clearly or the ideas are confusing:

- Let the person know that it is difficult to understand them.
- Emphasize the desire to understand what they are saying.
- Ask the person to speak more clearly. Suggest they rephrase or provide more information.
- Restate what was said to check whether the message was understood correctly.

Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings can occur as a result of jumping to conclusions or misinterpreting what was said. Cognitive difficulties that arise with mental disorders can make understanding difficult.

If a misunderstanding occurs:

- Calmly and briefly express what was meant and then either change the subject or walk away.
- Avoid arguing or discussing the misunderstanding at length. Apologize if the message was unclear.
- Consider that cognitive difficulties of the listener may have led to the misunderstanding.
- Losing one's temper or criticizing does not accomplish anything and will likely hurt the person and make the situation worse.

Talking to Children and Youth about Mental and Substance Use Disorders

When a mental or substance use disorder affects a family, children are often just as confused and scared as adult family members. They know something is wrong, and they need information to help them to understand what is happening. Parents, older siblings and other family members can help dispel fears and anxieties by talking openly about mental and substance use disorders. It is important to be honest, but optimistic.

Talk to children using language and explanations that are appropriate to their age level and maturity. Books and handouts that are written for children can help explain mental disorders in an age appropriate way. Comparing mental disorders to other physical illnesses can help normalize them. Another chronic illness such as diabetes, could be used as an example to demonstrate how people have symptoms that re-occur and ongoing care is needed.

It is important for adults to learn as much as they can about their loved one's specific mental or substance use disorder in order to be able to provide children with accurate information. If adults do not know the answer to a question, they should be honest and let children know they will try to find the answer.

What adults say and do regarding their family member's disorder will probably influence children more than anything they are told to do; therefore, being a positive role model is important.

Questions Children Commonly Ask

- **Why is my [family member] acting this way?**
- **Is it my fault?**
- **Can I catch it?**
- **Will they always be this way?**
- **Do they still love me?**
- **Why is this happening to our family?**

Age Appropriate Explanations

Young children need less specific information because of their limited ability to understand what is happening. They will likely focus on what they can see—a family member behaving strangely or visible emotions such as crying or angry outbursts. Keep explanations simple.

School-age children will likely ask more questions and want more specific information. They will probably want to know why someone is acting the way they do. They may also worry about their safety.

Youth can generally handle more complex information about mental and substance use disorders. They may already know a lot, but will likely have more questions.

Young children often feel guilty or afraid while older children are more likely to feel angry or embarrassed.

Suggestions for What to Talk About

- Ask children why they think their family member has been acting differently. Use their response as a way to begin talking about mental or substance use disorders.
- Ask children about the way their family member acts and how it makes them feel. They may need help to express their feelings. Let them know that feelings are neither right nor wrong, all feelings are okay. It's natural for them to have the feelings they're having.
- Explain that sometimes mental or substance use disorders can make a person act in strange, confusing or scary ways. Ask how that makes them feel.

Children, especially young children, often believe that if something happens in their world it is linked to something they did. Ask them if they somehow feel they are to blame for their family member's mental or substance use disorder and reassure them that it is not their fault. Mental and substance use disorders are nobody's fault.

Make sure that children know what to do and who to call if they don't feel safe. Family members can help children make a list of people they can call if they need help or someone to talk to.

Explain to children that even though other families experience mental and substance use disorders too, many people still don't understand these disorders. Since other people don't always understand mental and substance use disorders, they may say things that aren't true or they may make fun of them. Help children practice what they might say to their friends and other people. It is important that children know a caring adult is there to listen if they want to talk.

Example of what children might say to their friends:

"My brother has an illness that makes him act strange at times. He's taking medicine and trying to get better. It's really hard for me, so please don't tease me about it."

Worksheet: Personal Care Plan for Children

Children may find it helpful to think about what they can do to take care of themselves and who they can reach out to when they need someone to talk to. You can work through the following worksheet with your child to identify who they can call.

1. In an Emergency I can call:

- Family Member: _____
- Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868
- Police: 911
- Social Worker: _____

2. If I need someone to talk to, I can call:

- Family Member: _____
- My Friend: _____

3. If I am looking for information, I can go to:

- _____
- Kids Help Line 1-800-668-6868
- _____

4. People I can go to for help are:

- _____
- _____
- _____

5. Times I may need help are:

- _____
- _____
- _____

6. Things I can do to help myself feel better are:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Conflict Situations

When faced with a conflict situation, many people may feel uncomfortable about what to do. A common response is to avoid the issue and hope it will go away; however, conflict situations seldom go away on their own. While a person may be successful at avoiding dealing with the situation, the issues themselves remain. Over time, resentment may build up and more issues may arise. Eventually, family members may reach a point where numerous issues come to the surface in a single, emotionally-charged conflict. In this situation, resolution of the conflict is much more challenging.

“Pick Your Battles”

Below is a strategy for dealing with problematic behaviours that may help prevent some conflicts from arising. This approach is designed for families with young children, however, with some modifications it may also be useful when dealing with other ages.

Suggestions for Dealing with Conflict

- **Deal with issues as they arise. If emotions are very heated, allow some time to cool down and plan to discuss the issue at another time. Be sure to return to the discussion.**
- **Solve one problem at a time. Come back to other issues later.**
- **Resolve conflicts collaboratively, whereby everyone involved is satisfied with the resolution.**
- **Be direct and specific about the issue, but sensitive to the other person.**
- **Identify the specific behaviour that is causing the problem rather than generalizing. Separate feelings about the behaviour from feelings about the family member.**
- **Consider bringing in a third party if family members are unable to resolve the conflict themselves.**

Tips on Avoiding Conflict: Learning How to Respond Differently

Many children with mental disorders are inflexible and have a low frustration tolerance. The Basket Concept was designed to help reduce meltdowns and conflicts with these children. It's really about picking one's battles, or in this case, baskets.

Basket A

Behaviours in Basket A are non-negotiable and worth inducing and enduring meltdowns over.

Basket A is typically reserved for unsafe behaviours—defined as those that could be harmful to the child, other people, animals or property.

Basket B

Behaviours in Basket B are high priority, but not worth inducing a meltdown over. Resolving these behaviours requires communication and negotiation. Over time, parents can help their child develop coping skills that will reduce these behaviours such as brainstorming alternative solutions, making compromises and managing feelings of frustration. Examples of behaviours in Basket B might include not respecting curfew or conflicts with siblings.

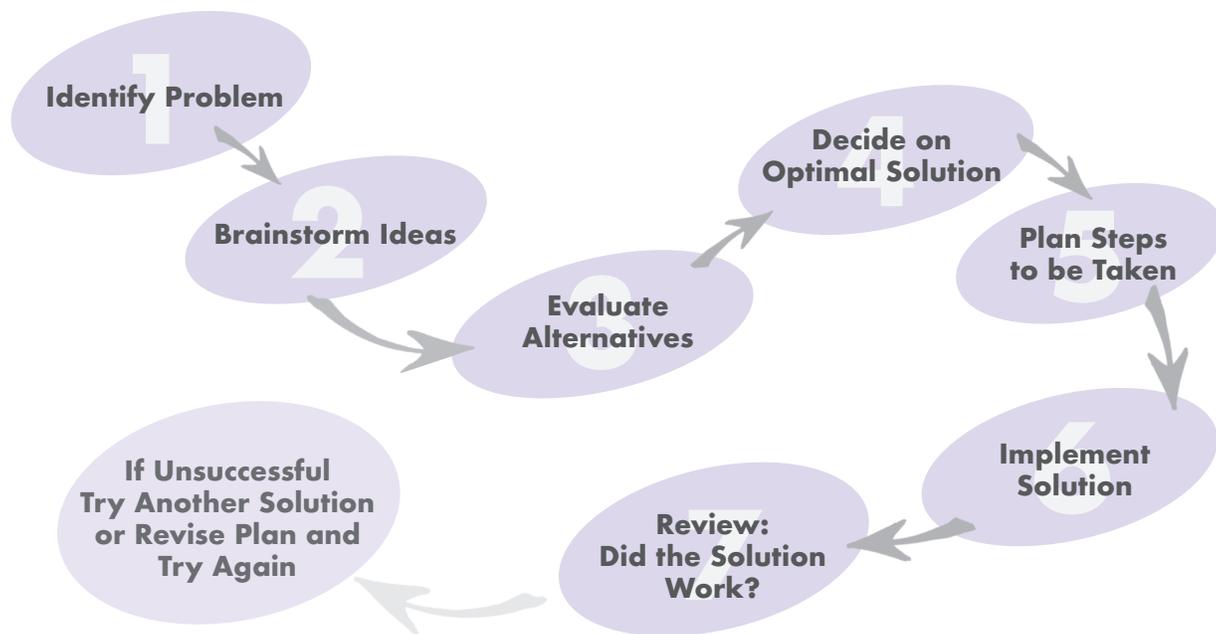
Basket C

Behaviours in Basket C once seemed important, or high priority, but have since been downgraded. If a behaviour is in Basket C, don't even mention it anymore. Examples of Basket C behaviours include eating too much sugar or not wearing a coat outside. When the explosive behaviours and meltdowns have been reduced, items from Basket C can be moved to Basket B.

~The Explosive Child, Ross Green

A Structured Approach to Problem-Solving

The following steps offer a structured approach to the resolution of problems.



Step 1 Identify the Problem

Getting a clear definition of the problem is critical to successful resolution. Understanding the specific problem also helps family members identify when the problem has been resolved.

It is important to focus on one issue at a time. Too often we let issues build up and then try to solve all of them at once.

Sometimes in the course of discussing one issue, others arise. If other issues arise, agree to set aside another time to deal with them.

Problems can be clarified using active listening skills reviewed earlier in this module:

- 1 Look at the person; take interest in what they are saying
- 2 Reduce any distractions and listen carefully to what they say
- 3 Show or indicate that you are following what they are saying
- 4 Ask questions if you are unclear what the problem is
- 5 Check that you have understood by telling the person what you thought they were saying

Step 2 Brainstorm Solutions

Brainstorming involves coming up with as many alternative solutions as possible. Encourage everyone to use their imagination—no matter how absurd the idea may seem. Ridiculous solutions can sometimes lead to discovery of a better solution than those that were more obvious at first. At this stage, possible solutions are just generated—not discussed. It is helpful to write these down for evaluation later.

Step 3 Evaluate Solutions

List all the positive and negative features of each solution. Remember some solutions can have positive features such as being easy to apply, but do not really solve the problem.

Step 4 Deciding on an Optimal Solution

The goal at this point is to pick a solution or set of solutions that seem the best option for resolving the problem. It is best if this solution is one that is not too difficult to implement. This may mean deciding on a solution that is workable rather than ideal. A workable solution can help get started toward a resolution of the problem. Even if it doesn't work, what is learned from it can be helpful if further action is needed. This is likely to be a better course of action than choosing a solution that is impossible to achieve.

Step 5 Plan

Resolution of a situation often involves taking a number of steps. Working out the details of the plan will help to ensure its success. Does everyone involved know what they need to do? Have strategies been identified for coping with unexpected difficulties?

Step 6 Implement Solution

Once the plan and the steps have been identified, put it into action!

Step 7 Review

Problem-solving can require a number of attempts. It is important to evaluate the process as it is implemented. The first attempt to resolve the problem may not succeed and unexpected difficulties may arise. Some steps may need to be changed or new ones added. It is important to remember what has been learned and to praise the efforts of those involved. If the solution does not work, consider the following questions:

What actions or steps were successful?

What actions weren't successful?

What could have been done differently?

- Encourage everyone to acknowledge feelings of disappointment but don't dwell on them. Failure is usually the result of poor planning or events beyond anyone's control rather than inadequacy of the person.
- Any attempt is a small success that should be praised. It may help to consider the first few attempts as practice or as steps towards resolving the problem. Even partial solutions are useful.
- Encourage the individual to try again.

If you want more detail on this structured problem-solving approach, see our wellness module on problem-solving at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/skills/module4

Can you think of other ways to resolve this situation?

Problem-Solving Tips

- Problem-solving skills need to be practiced
- Highly charged emotional issues need to be handled with care
- Try not to solve issues when you are tired or stressed

Problem-Solving Scenario

Mary is bothered by the fact that John comes to her at the end of each month for money. Although he has a part-time job and receives disability benefits, he always seems to be broke at the end of the month. John doesn't like having to ask Mary for money. They decide to see if they can come up with a solution to this problem.

Define the Problem

Vague

John is always broke.

Specific

John runs out of money at the end of each month and asks Mary for additional funds.

Brainstorm Solutions

- 1 John could keep a record of spending—dates and items purchased. This will help him to set up a budget.
- 2 John could ask for more hours.
- 3 John could ask for an increase in his salary.
- 4 John could make fewer purchases.

Evaluate Positives and Negatives of Potential Solutions

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 A record of spending will help to know where his money is going. 2 More hours will bring in more money. 3 John has been doing good work at his job and deserves a raise. 4 By not buying as much, John will have more money in his account. He wouldn't have to ask Mary for money and could start saving for more expensive items he'd like to buy. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 John has never had to keep a record and may find it difficult to do. 2 John is reluctant to work more as it puts more stress on him. 3 John is scared to ask his boss for a raise. 4 John would have to change his route home to avoid going by the stores. |
|---|--|

Decide on an Optimal Solution

John and Mary decide that John will keep a record of spending so they can create a budget for him and figure out where he can cut his spending.

Plan Steps to Be Taken

They work out a plan so that it is easy for John to remember what he buys.

Implement Plan

John keeps a record of his purchases and bills that need to be paid.

Review

At the end of the following month, John and Mary review John's record of spending. Although he still ran out of money, the record provides useful information about what John spends his money on.

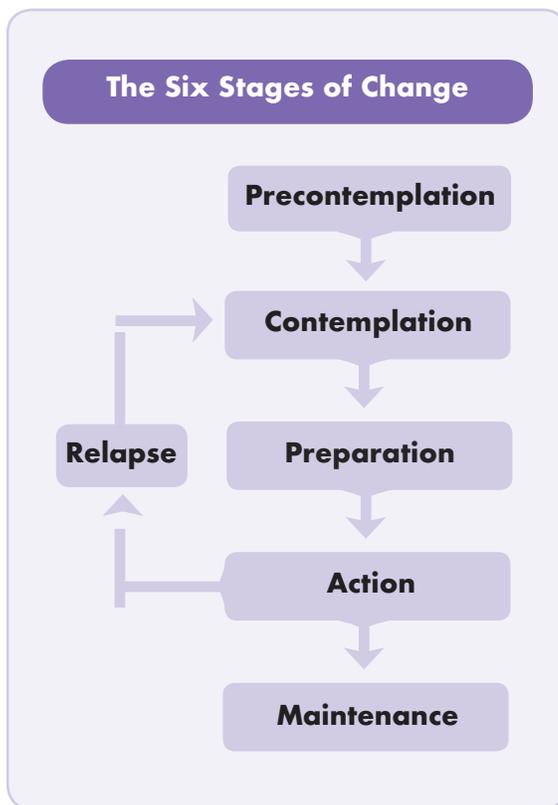
John notices that he spends money on lunches when he goes to work. He decides to start making his own lunch in order to save money.

Stages of Change

The Stages of Change Model outlines the different stages that people move through when contemplating a change in their behaviour.

The idea behind this model is that behaviour change does not happen in one step. Instead, the model proposes that a person progresses through different stages on their way to successful change. Each person progresses through the stages at their own individual rate and may go back and forth between stages.

A person's readiness to change their behaviour depends, in part, on what stage they are in. In the early stages, the person may not be ready for change, so expecting a behaviour change within a certain period of time is not reasonable and may be counterproductive. The decision to change must come from within the person—stable, long term change cannot be externally imposed by another person.



Understanding the process of change is important when trying to support a family member to make a change in their life.

Changing our behaviour is not an easy task and takes time.

Understanding where your family member is in this process can help you identify what you can do to assist them.

The Six Stages of Change

Precontemplation

In this stage, a person has no intention of changing their behaviour; they likely haven't even thought about it. They may not see the behaviour as problematic. For example, a teenager may believe that his drinking is just "having fun with his friends." He may feel his parents are just exaggerating the extent of his drinking.

The person may not be aware of a problem because they lack information or understanding about the consequences of their behaviour. Raising their awareness may help them to think about the benefits of changing their behaviour and move them to the next stage.

The person may be heavily invested in the problem behaviour and unwilling to change. Suggesting choices can be helpful as it enables the person to have a say in the situation.

The person may believe that they cannot change their behaviour and as a result they think the situation is hopeless. In this case, explore their barriers with them.

The goal at this stage is not to make the person change their behaviour but rather to get them thinking about the possibility of change and whether it may be beneficial to them. A non-judgmental attitude helps to lower any defensiveness about the behaviour.

Contemplation

In this stage, the person recognizes that a problem exists and is open to considering action but has not made a commitment to change. Ambivalence is a cornerstone of this stage, as the person goes back and forth about the possibility of making a change. They are open to information but have not been fully convinced.

Information and incentives are important at this stage. Discuss with your family member the pros and cons of the behaviour as well as the pros and cons of change. Let them describe this from their perspective. Even when someone isn't willing to change, they may still see some negative aspects of the behaviour.

Understanding what they see as the positive aspects of the behaviour will help identify barriers to change. Ask about previous attempts to change and look at these small successes rather than failures. Offer additional options if the person is interested.

Preparation

At this stage the person has decided to take some action and may have already taken steps in that direction. As a person moves through this stage, they work towards a serious attempt at changing. Their ambivalence is decreasing, although pros and cons are still being weighed.

Help the person to build an action plan and remove any barriers. It is also important to figure out how to evaluate the success of the plan.

Action

In this stage the person is aware of the problem and actively works towards modifying their behaviour in order to overcome the problem. Change usually requires sustained effort.

Support the person by helping them evaluate their change plan. Is it working? Where are the problems? Does the plan include ways to handle little slips? What can the family do to help?

Acknowledge the successes and the person's commitment to change. Frame any changes as being the result of the person's own actions rather than external factors.

Maintenance

In this stage, the person has developed a new pattern of behaviour which is becoming more firmly established. The possibility of slipping back into the old behaviour is becoming less and less.

Reassure the person that they can maintain the change. Assist in developing a plan for when they are feeling worried they will slip. If a slip does occur, encourage them not to give up. Change often involves multiple attempts, and slip ups are normal.

Slow down the process and explore what did and didn't work. Praise the person for their efforts and commitment to making the change.

Motivating a Family Member to Make a Change

Below are four basic principles that apply to motivating change in a person.

Express Empathy

When talking with a family member, try to listen to what they say without judgment. Accept their point of view and let them know that it is normal to have mixed feelings about wanting to make a change.

Avoid Argument

Everyone wants to have agency over their own actions and people can become defensive when others start telling them what they should do.

Instead of taking an authoritarian approach (i.e., “You need to ...”), it may be more helpful to focus on the negative consequences of continuing to engage in the behaviour and to devalue the positive aspects of the undesired behaviour. The person does not have to admit to the behaviour. The goal here is for the person to begin to see the benefits of change and develop arguments in support of moving towards the desired behaviour.

Roll with Resistance

It's okay to offer new ideas, but understand that they may be rejected or resisted. Offer but do not try to force them on the person. Reinforce any positive steps they are already taking (even small steps are important). The person may be ambivalent (i.e., have mixed feelings) about making a change. This is a normal part of the change process. Help them explore these feelings as they often contain the seeds of actual change.

Support Self-Efficacy (confidence in ability to make the change)

People are more motivated to change when they believe they have the ability and capacity to make the change. Encourage the person and reinforce their confidence by acknowledging their ability to make a difficult change. Unless they believe they will be successful, they are unlikely to continue working on their problems.

For a complete list of references used in developing the Family Toolkit, please see Family Toolkit: References at www.heretohelp.bc.ca

