

Emotion Coaching for Caregivers: Tips and Tricks

“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

Emotion coaching is a universal 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 and avoid or de-escalate outbursts. It can also be used to support the development of emotional health in general. But how does it work? Relating to your loved one using the principles and skills of emotion coaching 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 emotion coaching repeatedly, and over time, your loved one will develop the capacity to manage their own emotions instead of acting out with behaviors, developing symptoms or needing to connect with others in order to feel ok.

Steps of Emotion Coaching – Brief Version

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 emotion coaching outlined below.

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.

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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 2a: 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.

Step 2b: Support – Meet the Practical Need

Finally it’s time for problem-solving! When faced with an emotional challenge, 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 very important. Only after you’ve validated and offered emotional support do you then support your loved one practically.

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.

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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 X 3

I can see how that might make you feel _____ because X 3

It makes sense that you're feeling _____ because X 3

I can only imagine how difficult this must be because... because X 3

No wonder you're _____ because X 3

I can understand why you might feel _____ because X 3

“This is so _____” because X 3

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