Validation

WITH YOUTH WHO HAVE MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

Adolescence is hard and learning how to communicate matters.

Adolescence is a developmental period where people are driven to want to be independent in order to prepare for adulthood – in the process of becoming more independent, there is often some natural and normal questioning of authority. Moreover, it is typical that peer influences tend to be more valued than adult influences in youth. Adding a mental health condition to these factors makes communication even trickier for both caregivers/parents and adolescents.

A technique called **validation** can be quite helpful in communication with youth. Validation can help to "turn the temperature down" in a conversation and allow for connection instead of polarization. It involves taking on the perspective of the other person and finding what makes sense as a place to start connecting when there is conflict.

Before going into details about validation, it is important to remember the following:

1. We are all doing our best and at the same time
2. We can try hard / do something differently

Emotions

Emotions can be defined as complex responses to events (either in the environment or a thought or sensation). These responses involve physical changes (e.g. increased heart rate, tensing of muscles, change in energy level) and urges to act (e.g. urges to approach, confront, or avoid). Basic emotions include: happiness, anger, anxiety/fear and sadness.

Primary emotions help us meet our needs and are immediate reactions to events. We have various needs, including:

FOOD WATER AIR
PHYSICAL SAFETY SHELTER
RELATIONSHIPS
A SENSE OF CONTROL
SELF-ESTEEM IDENTITY

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If a stranger came into your kitchen and started taking your food, you might get angry.
The expression of this anger may lead to the intruder leaving your food and running out the door. In this sense, your anger protects your food.

If you heard on the news that a hurricane was coming to town, you might get anxious.
Your anxiety would motivate you to board up the windows on your home and protect your shelter.

If a relationship is lost, you might get sad.
If people who are close to you notice you being sad, they may approach you and comfort you to fill the relationship needs.

If someone insults you (e.g. threatens your self-esteem), you might get angry.
The anger protects your self-esteem the same way your anger protects your food.

Happiness tends to reinforce healthy behaviours in order to maintain your needs.

The bottom line is that primary emotions help us meet our needs – even the emotions that make us very uncomfortable.

The intensity of emotion is important. For example, if you have no anxiety, you might not get out of bed in the morning to get to work. Whereas if you have high levels of anxiety, you may not get out of bed out of fear that something horrible will happen in the day. For all emotions (including happiness), the intensity needs to be balanced in order to function well. Remember that emotions are all valid – emotions are not either good or bad. They are as they are and provide information to ponder.

As part of our culture, people are very often told not to have difficult emotions. “Stop worrying”, “Don’t be so angry”, “Cut out your crying”, “Calm down”, “Don’t sulk”. These messages tend to create secondary emotions or emotions about an emotion – most often feelings of shame or guilt about having a primary emotion. They often threaten the self-esteem or threaten relationship needs. These secondary emotions often end up amplifying the intensity of the primary emotion – and so the message has the opposite effect of what it is intended to do. This is particularly true for people who have sensitive temperaments (a biologically-based tendency towards strong emotions), brain injuries, severe mental illness, a history of being bullied or a history of trauma.

If emotions are too amplified and unbearable, young people may resort to unhealthy behaviours in order to relieve the emotion, like substance use, self-harm or eating disorders.

Many young people have received advice when feeling stressed. When they hear advice, they might resist. Often the reason for the resistance is that they may interpret suggestions for changing as “I am not good enough as I am” or “I am not doing it right”. So advice, though well intended, can be a threat to the self-esteem. The resistance is often there to protect the self-esteem.

Often the validation needs to come first, prior to any change taking place. Perspective-taking is valuable in these instances. Think “what would I want to hear? What would be most effective knowing this person very well?”

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Example of validating communication

In psychology, validation refers to the process of recognizing someone's experience as legitimate; that there is always a component of truth or justification in one's experience and emotions.

In communication with youth, you can validate the emotion, the thought they are having, the experience, or the behaviour. The easiest one to validate is the emotion.

Let's use the fictional example of Steven who is 17 years old and is refusing to attend treatment appointments. A common conversation might go as follows:

> Parent (calmly): "Steven, I am concerned. You're not going to school, you're getting into trouble with your friends and we never see you anymore. You need to go to the treatment center for your alcohol use."

> Steven (with anger): "You're ticking me off! There is no way I am going to that place – it's horrible! They just sit there and judge you and tell you what to do! You can't stop me from drinking!"

A common response would be:

> Parent (with anger): "You need to calm down! I don't like it when you talk to me that way. You are going to get treatment – end of story!"

A response that validates the **emotion**:

> Parent (calmly): "It makes sense that you're ticked off. I just brought up a bunch of stressful things in your life. You might have found that insulting."

Linking the emotion (anger) to the need (threat to self-esteem) is helpful.

A response that validates the **thought/belief**:

> Parent (calmly): "Yes, it would be hard to go to the treatment center. They have a lot of rules and you would be giving up some of your independence to go there."

Sometimes, using conditional statements like "If…, then…" Or "Given that…, I can see why…" when validating a thought.

> Parent (calmly): "Given that you see the staff as being judgmental, I can see why you would think that place is horrible."

A response that validates the **behaviour**:

> Parent (calmly): "I can see why you might continue to drink. It seems to relieve all of the stress that you're under."

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Often validating behaviour involves validating the emotion the behaviour is intended to relieve. It is important to respond in a calm way, as it can provide a cue for the youth to respond more calmly. It is common for caregivers/parents to feel dysregulated in moments like these. It can be helpful to take space and let the youth know, "I want to be helpful here, and I need some time to myself in order to be helpful. This is important and I want to come back to it."

WHY VALIDATE?

Validation helps decrease the secondary emotion – which alleviates the amplification effects described earlier.

Also, many people with mental health conditions question whether or not they can trust their experiences, given that they have likely had intense emotions/beliefs/behaviours in the past, which led them to trouble. Not being able to trust these experiences is disorienting and being disoriented is distressing. Validation helps orient the person – which alleviates this type of distress. It helps youth know they can trust part of their experience, and which part.

Sometimes validation is the goal of communication itself. Sometimes it is used to set the stage for change.

If you do follow it up with a "change strategy" like advice or direction, it is important to link the two in a way that maintains the validation. The easiest way to do this is to use the word "AND" or "AT THE SAME TIME" instead of "BUT". For example, it is common for many parents to start out attempts at validation by saying:

> "It makes sense that you are angry, BUT the alcohol is getting in the way of your life goals. That's why I think treatment might be helpful for you."

The word BUT tends to cancel out the validation. Now replace the word BUT:

> "It makes sense that you are angry, AND the alcohol is getting in the way of your life goals. That's why I think treatment might be helpful for you."

This allows for both the emotion to be valid and the invitation for change.

WHAT VALIDATION IS NOT:

Validation is NOT praise. (e.g. "You're doing a great job!")
Praise is usually used to reinforce healthy behaviour to make it more likely to continue. Some people find praise distressing; it can lead to thoughts like "I should be able to do this anyways" or "They will just be disappointed when I am not able to follow through in the future". Sometimes praise is helpful - it is important to check in with the person when it is done.

Validation is NOT approval. (e.g. "I like how you did that")
Using the example prior validating response "I can see why you might continue to drink. It seems to relieve all of the stress that you're under". This does not mean that you like that the person drinks.

Validation is NOT apologizing. (e.g. "Sorry for making you upset")
Look through the previous example statements – there is no apology in there. Sometimes apologizing is appropriate in these situations – but often it is not.

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Validation is NOT permissiveness. (e.g. "You're upset, do whatever you want.")
You can validate and set limits at the same time. "It makes sense that you are angry, AT THE SAME TIME you cannot threaten your father like that".

Validation statements often begin with the following:

"It makes sense…"

"I can see how/why/what led to you…"

"Of course…"

"Many people would…"

"It is understandable that you…" (be careful with this one – sometimes people interpret this to mean that you completely empathize with their experience – sometimes the reaction is "you don't understand me!" – which is true, we often don't fully know what its like to be that person).

WHAT IF IT IS TOO HARD TO FIND ANY PART OF THE EXPERIENCE TO VALIDATE?

It is important not to force validation when you don't see any valid aspect of an experience. It should be genuine. If you cannot see any validity in the experience, rather than saying "you're wrong" or "you're lying"; saying "I disagree" or "That's not how I see it" is often more helpful. These latter responses still protect the idea that there may be some aspect of the individual's experience that may be trusted. These statements may also be helpful:

"I don't understand, but I want to; can you help me understand?"

"I don't know what to say and I'm really glad you told me…"

HOW TO PRACTICE

While validation may seem like a simple concept, it is actually quite complex and takes practice. It may seem very fake at first (as most new ways of communicating do). Eventually, once you get the concept, it becomes more natural and in your own words. Initial attempts often go awry and there are some situations where validation may be done as best as can possibly be done, but there is no observed benefit. Remember to look for progress not perfection as this is a hard skill. It may help to practice within other relationships first (e.g. with friends, colleagues or even pets) and make sure to remember to self-validate too. It is important to practice and bring situations where it didn't go well to the health care team to see what could be done differently.

You may find it helpful to come back to this document.

Practice is important.

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