Northeast & Caribbean (HHS Region 2)
MHTTC
Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
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Having Difficult Conversations

A Guide for Providers, Teachers, and Parents

The pandemic, ongoing social and racial injustices, and the recent violent events on the Capitol may have you and those close to you feeling uncertain, unsettled, and overall fearful. As behavioral health providers, teachers, parents, peers, and community members, you can provide support during these challenging times in several impactful ways. Below are steps you can take when having difficult conversations.

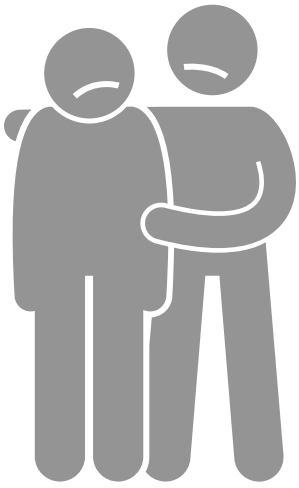
1 Acknowledge

Acknowledge the current events and provide opportunities to discuss. Make it clear that you are available to talk or just listen by providing the time needed to speak about these events. Create an open and welcoming environment that's comfortable and encourages conversations about people's thoughts and feelings in response to the event.

2 Listen & Understand

Use active listening skills to show empathy and understanding.

- *Maintain eye-contact.*
- *Appear open with your body language.*
- *Nod and make verbal acknowledgments to show you are listening intently.*
- *Ask what is distressing them - validate their feelings.*
- *Avoid offering solutions or problem-solving. They may just want to share their feelings and concerns without seeking advice.*
- *Be prepared for the person to share strong feelings. That's okay.*



In times of crisis, a person's sense of safety and control may feel threatened. Coping strategies, such as grounding techniques, can help them reclaim a sense of safety, feel rooted in the present moment, and strengthen their resilience.

An example of a brief grounding technique is 5-4-3-2-1 where are you:

- *Name 5 things you can hear*
- *Name 4 things you can see*
- *Name 3 things you can touch*
- *Name 2 things you can smell*
- *Name 1 thing you can taste*

More examples of grounding activities can be found at
https://www.healthline.com/health/grounding-techniques#physical-techniques

3 Use Open-Ended Questions

Use open-ended questions to inquire about how the person is feeling.

For example, ask:

- *What are your thoughts about what is currently going on?*
- *How can I provide support to you during this time?*
- *What would be helpful to you during this time?*
- *How are you feeling?*
- *How does this event make you feel?*
- *What does this event mean to you?*
- *How do you think this event impacts you now?*
- *How do you think this event impacts you in the future?*

As a friendly reminder, some people may be uncomfortable sharing their feelings verbally. Consider having the person complete an emotion check-in regarding current events. This can be done anonymously to get an overall sense of how students/staff are feeling. A quick emotion check-in can use emojis or other symbols/words to illustrate certain feelings and their intensity.

4 Reflect

Reflect back to the person what they are telling you and the feelings they are describing. For example, "you feel scared because these events are unsettling." Or, paraphrase the content of what they said to you, such as, "these events are difficult to watch and you're afraid." Reflecting lets the person know you heard them and gives them an opportunity to correct you if you misunderstood them.

5 Affirm

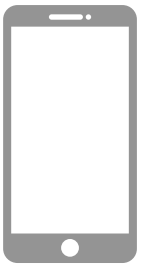
Affirm the person's strengths exhibited during difficult times. Acknowledge and remind them of previous times they have shown strength and capacity in similar situations. You can always find something positive in the person to affirm!

6 Self-Care

These challenging situations are likely impacting you, too. It's important to maintain self-care practices during this time and encourage others to do the same.

- *Limit the time spent on social media and watching violent events on the news. Set one or two times during the day to check social media and news sites.*
- *Attempt to create some kind of "hope" in your world by looking for a positive thought, planning something uplifting to do, or finding an example of someone making positive changes.*

Resources



[How to Talk with your Team about the Violence at the US Capitol]

[Provider and Educator Well-Being and Responding to Traumatic Events Resources]

[How to talk to children about difficult news]

[Helping Kids Understand the Riots at the Capitol]

[Caring for Students in the Wake of a Traumatic News Event]

[Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics]

[NASP Guidance for Ensuring Student Well-Being in the Context of the 2020 Election]

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