

6 Levels of Validation

The first level of validation is being present. When was the last time you gave 100% undivided attention to your loved one? Many people are uncomfortable with the emotions of others because they either do not know how to respond, or find their own uncomfortable emotions rising to the surface. Being present when intense emotion is expressed is not easy, but worth the effort as a way to support your loved one.

The second level of validation is accurate reflection. When you are reflecting the thoughts and feelings of your loved one, you verbalize what you have heard. Accurate reflection can sound like, "So, I hear you saying you are frustrated that your energy level is low," or "I can tell you are feeling anxious about going to the party tonight." The key is to not be a parrot, repeating your loved one's words verbatim, as that can sound as if you are being sarcastic instead of being supportive.

The third level of validation is reading a person's behavior and guessing what they might be feeling. Many people are out of touch with their feelings. There are many reasons for this, including having an invalidating environment as a child, where they were told they were not having the feeling they actually were experiencing ("No, you are not hungry - you just ate!" or "Nice girls don't get angry" or "Boys don't cry.") Your loved one may also confuse emotions, such as thinking excitement is anxiety or anger is sadness. Or your loved one may have learned that others don't react well when they display their emotions, so they keep them locked down tightly. In this level of validation, you might say something like, "I'm guessing that comment from your supervisor was hurtful." Of course, your loved one might correct you, and that is okay. It was just a guess, and your loved one is the expert on his/her own emotions.

The fourth level of validation is understanding the person's behavior in terms of their history and biology. We react to the world based on our previous experiences and biological wiring. If we have had a negative experience, future situations similar to the previous experience may cause a bad reaction. For example, if your loved one was bitten and scratched by a cat as a child, s/he may not want to be around cats now. An example of how you can validate this might be, "Given your experiences with cats, I completely understand why you would not want to go somewhere where there are three cats in the house."

The fifth level of validation is normalizing or recognizing emotional reactions that anyone would have. Knowing that other people would likely feel the same in a similar situation helps to reduce the negative feelings your loved one may be having. This might sound like, "Of course you are anxious about the job interview - everyone feels anxious when doing something this important." (However, do not follow this up with, "You will be fine," as that can negate the previous statement of validation.)

The sixth level of validation is radical genuineness. What is "radical genuineness"? It is treating your loved one as a real person with real feelings instead of as someone who has a mental illness and is incapable of solving his/her own problems. When you express radical genuineness, you are meeting your loved one as an equal, and expressing both your support as well as your belief that s/he has the capacity to solve his/her own issues.