

# The Best Way to Comfort Someone When They're Sad

A limited yet growing body of research suggests that one of the most powerful ways to support someone is also the simplest: Start a conversation.



By [Melinda Wenner Moyer](#)

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When a friend, partner, family member or co-worker is upset, you've probably wondered how best to make them feel better. Let them vent? Offer a chocolate bar? Give them space so they can have a good cry? The ideal approach depends on the person and the context, experts say. But [a limited yet growing body of research](#) suggests that one of the most powerful ways to soothe a person's feelings is to start a conversation.

Words play a powerful role in shaping people's emotions because humans are such a social species. People's brains are finely attuned to information they get from others, and they're "constantly using it as feedback to change their behaviors and responses," said Razia Sahi, a doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, who studies how social interactions influence people's emotions. "Other people care a lot about what we think."

But the words we use to comfort others matter, as some forms of verbal support have been found to be more helpful than others. In [a small study published on Dec. 8](#), for instance, Ms. Sahi and her colleagues found that people consider validation — phrases like, “I understand why you feel that way” or “That sounds very hard” — to be especially comforting.

Other forms of feedback, such as helping someone recognize that things will improve or encouraging a person to see the situation from a new perspective, can help too, [research suggests](#). And sometimes, those kinds of responses may even be more useful than phrases of validation in the long run. “Different strategies meet different needs,” said Karen Niven, a professor of organizational psychology at the Sheffield University Management School in Britain who studies how people influence the emotions of those around them.

Here’s a research-based guide for supporting friends, colleagues and loved ones in times of need.

## Validate their emotions.

One consistent finding from the research is that telling people they shouldn’t feel so bad typically makes them feel worse. In [a landmark study published in 2012](#), researchers listened in on 228 phone calls between angry customers and customer service representatives who handled medical-related billing questions and complaints. When the representatives told the upset customers to “calm down” or “relax,” the customers typically became angrier.

These kinds of strategies backfire because they imply that the person’s feelings “might be inappropriate, or that their emotion might be more intense than the situation calls for,” Ms. Sahi explained. It inadvertently sends the message that they’re overreacting, which, paradoxically, only makes them more emotional.

“There’s no evidence across any studies that that works well,” Dr. Niven said.

In their new study, which involved two experiments, Ms. Sahi and her colleagues asked 318 people what kinds of feedback from others they would feel most comforted by after experiencing a conflict with someone they knew (a fight with a friend or roommate, for instance, or feelings of betrayal). Validation was the clear winner. Participants said they found affirming comments like, “I can imagine that was difficult,” to be more comforting than other kinds of feedback that tried to help a person change their thinking about the problem, like, “Try to see both sides of the situation” or “Try to focus on the glass half-full instead of half-empty.”

“When people hear you and they say they understand you, you feel trusted, you feel cared for, you feel connected,” Ms. Sahi said, “and feeling connected to other people is extremely, extremely important for us.” Because our ancestors were more likely to

survive when they were members of a group, the desire to be accepted by others “is a survival instinct that we’ve had embedded in us,” she explained.

## Help them strategize (if they’re open to it).

While phrases of validation can make people feel better in the moment, they won’t necessarily help them solve their problem or resolve their negative emotions in the long run, Dr. Niven said. So if they’re open to it, talking through how to overcome a particular hurdle or repair a conflict may give an upset friend or colleague a sense of control over their situation, Dr. Niven said. This can help ease their emotions and even potentially resolve the issue entirely.

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Yet not everyone is receptive to such an approach, because it can feel invalidating, Ms. Sahi said. So first, listen to how they discuss their situation, she said. [Researchers have found](#) that people give cues as to what they want based on the words they use. If they focus on their emotions by saying something like, “I feel like they don’t care about me,” they are probably only looking for validation. If, on the other hand, they say that they wish they felt differently, or that they want to know how to solve a problem, then they are “inviting you to help them,” Ms. Sahi explained.

## If they welcome problem solving, frame it carefully.

If you think the other person is open to letting you help them strategize, you may still want to start by validating their feelings, Dr. Niven said. Tell them that you understand why they feel the way they do, or that you would have reacted similarly. [Studies have found](#) that people are more receptive to advice after they have been made to feel emotionally supported than if they haven’t received any validation at all.

Then, ease into a problem-solving strategy. The participants in Ms. Sahi’s study found an approach called “temporal distancing” most useful. This involves helping people understand that while things may be bad now, they’ll likely improve over time. People preferred this approach over strategies designed to make them feel more optimistic (like “glass half-full” phrasing) or suggestions to try to see the situation from another person’s perspective. It’s unclear why this approach was preferable, but perhaps it was because it didn’t feel confrontational or invalidating, said Dr. Niven, who was not involved with the research.

It may also help to consider how the upset person provided support to you in the past, Ms. Sahi said. Her study found that people who tended to provide problem-solving advice to others also preferred to receive that form of advice when they were upset.

Some problems, though, might need a more serious intervention. Perhaps a friend is in denial about an abusive relationship and you want to help them recognize the gravity of the situation. In circumstances where you might want to challenge someone’s

perspective, first explain that your feedback is rooted in how much you care about them, said Jamil Zaki, a social psychologist at Stanford University. “Say, ‘I really want you to feel fulfilled. I want you to feel empowered. And I think that this particular situation you’re in might be going against that goal,’” he said.

## Remember that it’s the thought that counts.

Although it can be hard to know how best to help someone, Dr. Zaki emphasized that we should be confident that our attempts will be appreciated — even if we don’t know what we’re doing.

In [a small study published in 2022](#), researchers found that people typically underestimated how useful their attempts to help others would be, perhaps because they feared that their advice wasn’t perfect. Researchers found that people appreciated support even if it wasn’t exactly aligned with their needs.

In other words, what matters most is not that you say the right thing, but that you are present and trying to help. “We can make a difference to other people with relatively little effort,” Dr. Zaki said. “Sometimes just being there is all that you need to do.”