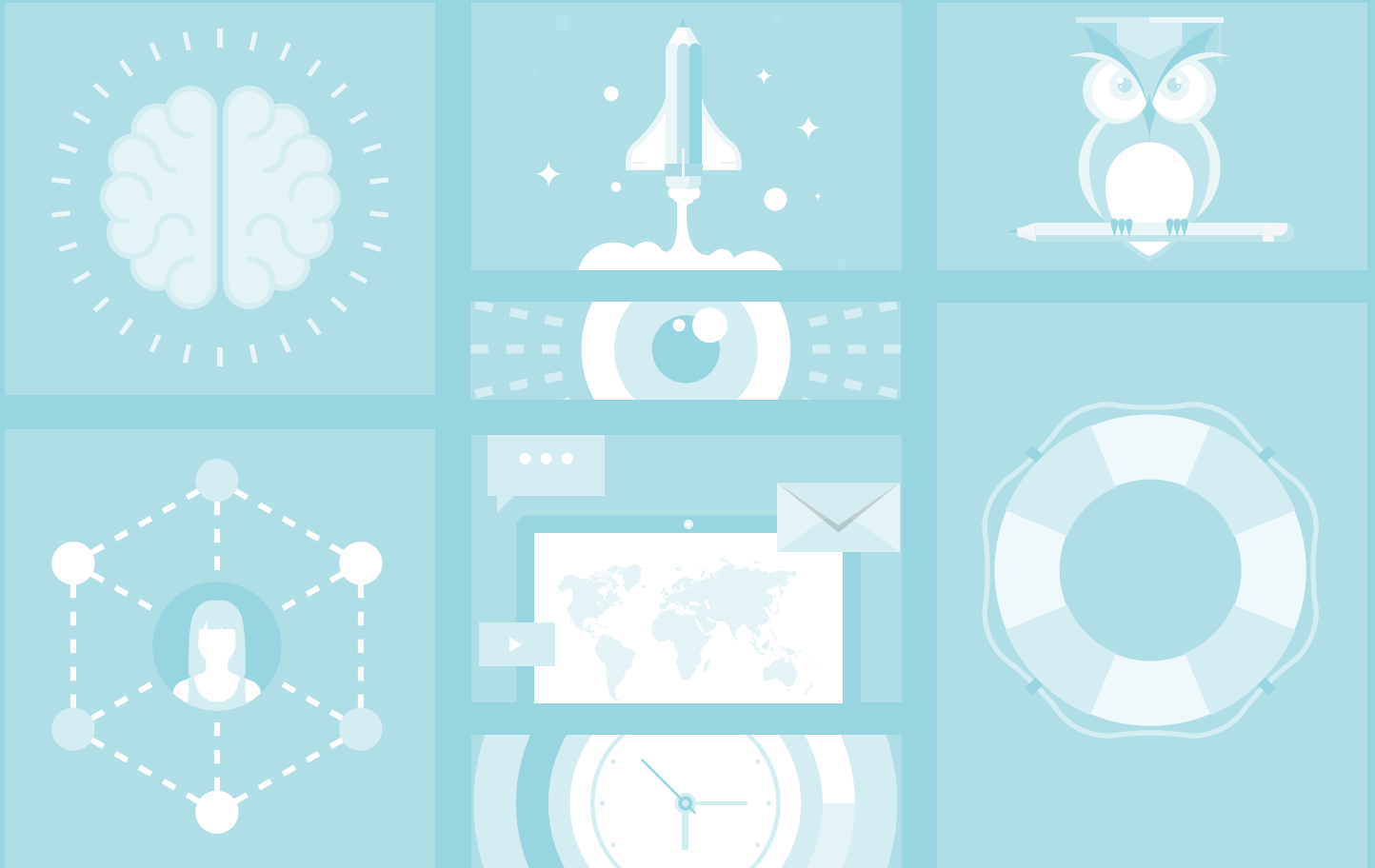


Peer Support





Why Peer Support?

The use of peer support has helped change the culture of mental health from illness and disability to health and ability (Mead et al., 2001). Peer support specialists are better at promoting hope and the belief in a possible recovery than their non-peer counterparts (Repper & Carter, 2011). Also, peer support interventions help reduce symptoms of depression (Pfeiffer, Heisler, Piette, Rogers, & Valenstein 2010).

Peer support specialists often benefit personally from the work that they do. Providing a valued service impacts personal self-esteem, increases confidence, and helps with personal recovery (Solomon, 2004). In fact, a study in Belgium found that providing peer support was more beneficial than receiving it (Bracke, Christiaens, & Verhaeghe, 2008).

The Benefits

Fosters social networking
Reduces physician burnout
Improves quality of life
Promotes wellness
Improves coping skills
Supports acceptance
Improves compliance
Reduces concerns
Increases health satisfaction

Peer Program Structures

Of the various models for peer-to-peer programs, we will focus on two: (1) one-on-one and (2) group support.

This support can be delivered through multiple modes, including in-person, by phone or over the Internet. A peer-to-peer program can apply and combine these models and modalities in various ways, offering more than one option to participants. This is increasingly necessary as people use and need different types of support at different times.

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Sources

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Identifying Traumatic Stress.

What is traumatic stress?

Most people who go through traumatic events may have temporary difficulty adjusting and coping, but with time and good self-care, they usually get better. If the symptoms get worse, last for months or even years, and interfere with day-to-day functioning, this may develop into Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Getting effective treatment after a traumatic experience can be critical to reduce symptoms and improve how someone functions.

Symptoms

All of these emotions and symptoms are normal... that is until they start impacting your everyday life.

One way to identify if someone needs help is to see if these symptoms are impacting how someone functions in their “normal” tasks both at work or at home.

- Intense feelings of distress when reminded of a tragic event
- Extreme physical reactions to reminders of trauma such as nausea, sweating or a pounding heart
- Invasive, upsetting memories of a tragedy
- Flashbacks (feeling like the trauma is happening again)
- Nightmares of frightening things or of the event
- Loss of interest in life and daily activities
- Feeling emotionally numb and detached from other people
- Sense of a not leading a normal life (not having a positive outlook of your future)
- Avoiding certain activities, feelings, thoughts or places that remind you of the tragedy
- Difficulty remembering important aspects of a tragic event



Autonomic Nervous System: Precision Regulation | *What to look for*

	Lethargic <i>Parasympathetic I (PNS I)</i>	Calm <i>Parasympathetic II (PNS II)</i>	Alert/Active <i>Sympathetic I (SNS I)</i>	Fight/Flight <i>Sympathetic II (SNS II)</i>	Hyper Freeze <i>Sympathetic III (SNS III)</i>	Hypo Freeze <i>Parasympathetic III (PNS III)</i>
	<i>“Normal” Life</i>			<i>Threat to Life</i>		
Primary State	Apathy, Depression	Safe, Clear Thinking	Alert, Ready to Act	Reacting to Danger	Awaiting Escape	Preparing for Death
Impulse	Too Low	Low	Moderate	High	Overloaded	Overwhelmed
Muscles	Slack	Relaxed/toned	Toned	Tense	Rigid	Flaccid
Respiration	Shallow	Easy, into belly	Increasing	Fast, chest	Hyperventilating	Hypoventilating
Heart Rate	Slow	Resting	Quick, forceful	Quick, forceful	Tachycardia	Bradycardia
Emotions	Grief, sadness, same, disgust	Calm, love	Anger, shame, disgust, anxiety	Rage, Fear	Terror, dissociation	Dissociation, may not feel
Sociability	Withdrawn	Probable	Possible	Limited	Not likely	Not possible
Integration	Not likely	Likely	Likely	Not likely	Not possible	Not possible
Recommended Intervention	<i>Engage in Peer-to-Peer Therapy, and potentially seek professional assistance</i>	<i>Continue Peer-to-Peer Therapy direction</i>	<i>Continue Peer-to-Peer Therapy but seek professional assistance</i>	<i>Stop Peer-to-Peer Therapy and leverage professional assistance</i>	<i>End Peer-to-Peer Therapy and leverage professional assistance</i>	<i>A medical emergency</i>



Facilitating individual support.

Individual Peer Support

Peer Support is a naturally occurring, mutually beneficial support process, where people who share a common experience meet as equals, sharing skills, strengths and hope. It allows people to learn ways of coping from each other.

Remember to observe your colleague's state in order to help modulate impulses. Adjust in yourself to think clearly and prevent vicious trauma and compassion fatigue.

It is always helpful to direct your colleagues to receive professional mental health help. This may need to be destigmatized. One way to do this is to say, "What we went through was difficult and it was not normal. We all need help to get through this."

1

Purpose

It's important that you always remember that support is about the person you are talking to, not yourself. Your support and what is discussed is private and confidential. A reminder of this from time to time is very important.

2

Listen

Being a good listener - and acting as an example in this regard - means being an active listener, one who is obviously listening and understanding what is being said. How do you let people know that you're listening?

- Body language (use your body, your face, your head to cue and facilitate the communication)
- Be present
- Withhold judgment. Everyone is different and there is not a singular correct way to do something.
- Be empathetic. Try to feel what your peer feels, imagine what they are feeling and communicate it.
- Eye contact (looking in the speaker's eyes, not looking around the room)
- Brief encouraging statements, also sometimes called nonverbal encouragers ("Uh-huh" or "Mmm-hmm")
- Nodding
- Repeating or rephrasing the speaker's last phrase to let him know you understood.

3

Share

Create an atmosphere in which the person you are talking to feels comfortable talking about and working through very personal issues and experiences. The act of revealing personal information gives you a chance to offer support, ideas, and assistance. It fosters an atmosphere of trust. When someone discloses information, as a facilitator, you may have to guide the discussion to make the person comfortable. Asking open-ended questions - those which cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" - is very useful at this point.

- "What's it like for you when you're trying to get mentally prepared for your shift?"
- "What have you told your family about what's going on with your job right now?"
- "How do you manage taking care of yourself when you're so focused on others?"

4

Support

Offering support is one of the simplest and most immediate things you can do. Giving someone support can help someone realize that reaching their goals is possible, give them hope, or just let them know that you empathize with what they're going through. Support consists of making statements that show your understanding, sympathy, and concern.

Listen for the feelings expressed and address those feelings. Support can also be expressed through body language (such as making eye contact or smiling). Care should be taken in using touch as a form of support - in some circumstances, someone may be a survivors of abuse, and a touch may be threatening or uncomfortable instead of comforting. You can:

- Provide an honest compliment
- Ask how she/he is feeling
- Validate emotions ("You seem pretty upset...")
- Restate what someone says to you ("What I'm hearing is..." or "It sounds like you're saying...")
- Reassure the person that their feelings are normal

5

Solutions

While solving problems isn't the goal of peer-to-peer support, it is something that someone may hope for or expect. Collaboratively take part in the problem-solving process so that no single person is seen as the solution to their difficulties. It's the facilitator's job to help someone learn how to help themselves or others with their own problem solving. Here are some steps to problem solving:

Clarifying the problem

Make sure everyone fully understands the problem. If you aren't sure what the problem is, ask questions to get more information.

- "What are you finding to be the hardest to keep up with?"
- "Do you find that these things are consistently hard to get done? Or, is it more difficult at particular times?"
- "What lessons did we learn from caring for this patient/family?"

Talking about the alternatives

Bring up possible solutions to the problem, but be very careful to word them in a way that doesn't give advice. For example, instead of "You should do this," more useful wording could be, "I wonder what it would be like for you to try this..." or "Maybe you could try this..." Telling people what to do is not the purpose or responsibility of your support. It takes away a person's feeling that she or he can handle their own problems and can make people feel attacked and uncomfortable. Try asking the person to tell you what's worked well for them in similar situations. You can also ask the person with the problem what she/he thinks might work.

6

Closing

If you are caught up in a particularly intense discussion or in helping a colleague solve a problem, you might go a few extra minutes, but generally it's best to stop before anyone is tired and eager to leave. When the discussion is winding down or when a previously agreed-upon ending time has arrived, wrap things up. Some ways you can close are:

- Make a summary statement: Summarize the topics that were discussed and alternatives that were chosen.
- Highlight any positive observations or solutions.
- Ask for additional comments or questions
- Make mental notes: personally debrief what was discussed while it's fresh in your mind.

- "What would it be like to ask for help?"
- "What has helped you get through hectic times in the past?"
- "Would any of you like to suggest things _____ could do to make things run more smoothly?"

Choosing which option(s) to take

Discuss the pros and cons of each suggestion. You can then let the person with the problem come to a decision, or she/he may want to take some time on their own to consider the possibilities. Let her/him know that the group cares and wants to know how things turn out.

Offering help

Do what you can to help the person in need, but try not to over stretch yourself. It is important to understand when someone may need professional counseling, and to delicately direct them to that resource.



Facilitating group support.

Setting up

Peer-to-peer support groups can be long-running, or they can be restricted for certain periods of time. For example, the local crisis center may offer a six-week support group twice yearly for people who have lost a family member to suicide, rather than a single, year-round group. This type of time-limited format is best suited to crisis situations, such as bereavement or divorce. A drawback of this format is that the group may not be available at a time that someone needs it. Problems that are more long-term in nature - a chronic disease, for example - are better served by ongoing, long-term support groups.

Group Type

Open support groups are those in which new members are welcome to join at any time during the life of the group. This may also mean that anyone can join the group - friends, family members, etc. In closed groups, people are only allowed to join the group at certain times (e.g., for the first three weeks only) or under certain circumstances (e.g., groups that are only for women). Some organizations offer both types of meetings - open meetings, which anyone can attend, and closed meetings, which are only for people going through the program. If you plan on working on a very specific issue and want the entire group to go through the process at the same time, you may want to consider having a closed group. However, open groups are best for most kinds of support groups.

Facilitator

Picking the right person to lead your support group is of utmost importance. The facilitator opens and closes the meetings, sets the tone for the discussion, helps members learn how to listen and offer support to each other, and deals with any problems that come up during the meeting. The ideal facilitator will possess the following qualities:

- Flexible schedule: having enough time to perform the required tasks and commit to be there for every meeting.
- Lots of energy: a positive attitude, be in generally good health, and be able to put in the extra hours if necessary.
- Ability: experience facilitating groups, responsible, articulate, fair, organized, and able to work well with others.
- Support: access to needed resources to run the group (a phone, a car, etc.), and people to rely on for assistance, if necessary.
- The desire to do the job: an interest in the topic or at least a commitment to helping others.

1

The Meeting

Introduce yourself. If this is a new group or there are new members present for the first time, explain the ground rules. The most common ground rule for support groups is that everything discussed in the group must be kept confidential. Reminding the group of this from time to time is very important. Be sure that everyone understands the rules. Have everyone introduce themselves, stating their names and a little bit about why they were interested in the group.

An example of how you can start is by saying, "This session is for you to share your experiences of what you have gone through. Many of your co-workers are experiencing these things.....sleep issues, nightmares, loss of appetite, increased anxieties/worry – especially when coming to work. Validation that they all experienced this trauma working in the ER."

2

Discussion

Then begin the discussion, either by touching on something that was mentioned by one of the members or by bringing up a prepared topic.

- Repeating or rephrasing the speaker's last phrase to let her/him know you understood.

3

Listen

Being a good listener - and acting as an example in this regard - means being an active listener, one who is obviously listening and understanding what is being said. How do you let people know that you're listening?

- Body language (use your body, your face, your head to cue and facilitate the communication)
- Be present
- Withhold judgment. Everyone is different and there is not a singular correct way to do something.
- Be empathetic. Imagine what they are feeling and communicate it.
- Eye contact (looking in the speaker's eyes, not looking around the room).
- Brief encouraging statements, also sometimes called nonverbal encouragers ("Uh-huh" or "Mmm-hmm").
- Nodding
- Repeating or rephrasing the speaker's last phrase to let him know you understood.

4

Share

One advantage of a support group is that they can create an atmosphere in which members feel comfortable talking about and working through very personal issues and experiences. Disclosure - the act of revealing personal information - gives other members a chance to offer support, ideas, and assistance. It also encourages other members to share their own experiences and fosters an atmosphere of trust in the group. To maintain that trust, facilitators may find that they also need to disclose information from time to time. When a member discloses information, the facilitator may have to guide the discussion to make the member comfortable or encourage others to join the discussion. Asking open-ended questions - those which cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" - is very useful at this point.

- "What's it like for you when you're trying to get mentally prepared for your shift?"
- "What have you told your family about what's going on with your job right now?"
- "How do you manage taking care of yourself when you're so focused on others?"

You can also plan topics ahead of time. Some support groups do things like have their members do reading or keep journals of their experiences to help spark discussion.

5

Support

This is the main reason this group exists! Fortunately, offering support is one of the simplest things to do in the course of running a support group. Giving members support can help them realize that reaching their goals is possible, give them hope, or just let them know that you empathize with what they're going through.

Support consists of making statements that show your understanding, sympathy, and concern. Listen for the feelings expressed by the member, and address those feelings. Support can also be expressed through body language (such as making eye contact or smiling) or touch (hugging, patting the member's arm). Care should be taken in using touch as a form of support - in some circumstances, such as a support group for survivors of child sexual abuse, touch may be threatening and uncomfortable instead of comforting.

Usually, members will offer support to each other on their own, or they will quickly pick up on how to do so by following your example. However, you may have to ask questions to coax them into offering support by asking questions.

- "I know things are tough for you, but I hope you can take comfort from how much your family obviously loves you."
- "How can we support you right now?"
- "Has anyone been through similar experiences?"

While being supportive yourself, you must also help others in the group learn how to be so as well. Demonstrate the active listening skills listed above while the member is speaking. Wait 10 seconds or so and then, if no other members have done so, offer support. Group members will usually pick up on this and start offering support themselves. If they don't you may have to ask them questions about how they are affected by the discloser's experience.

- "(Group Member 1), what can you say to (Group Member 2) that might help?"
- "How can we give (Group Member 3) some support now?"
- "What do you think about what (Group Member 4) is going through, (Group Member 5)?"

6

Solutions

While solving problems shouldn't be the only goal of a support group, it is something that many members hope for and expect. All members should take part in the problem-solving process so that no single person is seen as the solution to their difficulties. It's the facilitator's job to help members learn how to help each other with problem solving. Here are some steps to problem solving:

Clarifying the problem

Make sure everyone fully understands the problem. If you aren't sure what the problem is, ask questions to get more information.

- "What are you finding to be the hardest to keep up with?"
- "Do you find that these things are consistently hard to get done? Or, is it more difficult at particular times?"
- "What lessons did we learn from caring for this patient/family?"

Talking about the alternatives

Bring up possible solutions to the problem, but be very careful to word them in a way that doesn't give advice. For example, instead of "You should do this," more useful wording could be, "I wonder what it would be like for you to try this..." or "Maybe you could try this..." Telling people what to do is not the purpose or responsibility of your support. It takes away a person's feeling that she or he can handle their own problems and can make people feel attacked and uncomfortable.

Try asking the person to tell you what's worked well for them in similar situations. You can also ask the person with the problem what she/he thinks might work.

- "What would it be like to ask for help?"
- "What has helped you get through this in the past?"
- "Would any of you like to suggest things ____ could do to make things run more smoothly?"

Choosing which option(s) to take

Discuss the pros and cons of each suggestion. You can then let the person with the problem come to a decision, or she/he may want to take some time on their own to consider the possibilities. Let her/him know that the group cares and wants to know how things turn out.

Offering help

Do what you can to help the person in need, but try not to over stretch yourself. It is important to understand when someone may need professional counseling, and to delicately direct them to that resource.

7

Closing

If you are caught up in a particularly intense discussion or in helping a colleague solve a problem, you might go a few extra minutes, but generally it's best to stop before anyone is tired and eager to leave. When the discussion is winding down or when a previously agreed-upon ending time has arrived, wrap things up. Here are some ways you can close the meeting:

- Make a summary statement: Summarize the topics that were discussed and alternatives that were chosen.
- Highlight any positive observations or solutions that came up.
- Ask for additional comments or questions
- Make notes: personally debrief what was discussed while it's fresh in your mind.

This information can be used to jump-start the next meeting. If you keep any notes ensure that they are stored in a safe place to insure confidentiality.



Tips on Sustaining

Keep track of your group's progress and adjust. From time to time, ask members for their feedback on how the group is going. Find out how useful they find it, how comfortable they feel, and their likes and dislikes about the group.

Share responsibility for the group. Letting others take leadership roles helps them feel more committed to and invested in the group. Make sure members know their help is appreciated. No one person should have to do everything, and sharing responsibilities will help you avoid burnout.

Be sure everyone has a chance to talk. Some people are naturally more talkative than others. Asking questions to get quiet members to speak up is important. It's also crucial to keep the more vocal members on-topic and gently remind them to let others have a turn at times.

Emphasize the importance of confidentiality. In order for your members to feel safe enough in your support group to self-disclose and work through problems, they need to feel sure that nobody is going to be telling people outside of the group about the group's discussions. Make sure this is well understood by everyone.

Encourage outside contact among members. Members can offer support to each other outside of meetings. The "buddy" system, used by groups like AA, encourages members to take interest in one another's well-being and form relationships outside the group.

Keep recruiting. Groups can stagnate when the membership remains the same all the time, and if members who leave are never replaced your group will not survive.

Share rewards and failures. Let members know that you appreciate their contributions. When people make mistakes, don't place blame. Don't heap all of the praise when something goes well on any one person.

Keep a realistic perspective. Don't idealize the support group. There may sometimes be people that your group won't be able to help; this doesn't mean your efforts are futile. Also, when members leave, it doesn't mean you've failed them. Usually it means that they have used the group as much as they think is useful and moved on with their lives.

Remember that this is a support group. The dynamics of a group may change over time - for example, it could become more social in function, or it could change focus in terms of topic. No matter how the group changes, your group's primary purpose is to provide support and understanding to its individual members.

Tips on What Not to Say

"I know how you feel." A griever thinks: No you don't.

"She/he is in a better place now." A griever thinks: Who cares!? I want him/her to be here.

"It will get easier." A griever thinks: That seems impossible or I don't want to forget the person I love.

"At least she/he lived a long life." A griever thinks: Is that supposed to make me miss him/her less?

"It was God's will" or "God has a plan" or "Everything happens for a reason." A griever thinks: Why is this God's plan? Why would God make us suffer? I don't care if its God's plan, it hurts.

"God never gives us more than we can handle" A griever thinks: Oh yeah? How do you know? Easy for you to say. My [son couldn't handle his addiction] [daughter couldn't handle her depression] [husband couldn't handle his cancer].

"Don't cry" or "You need to be strong now" A griever thinks: I can't stop. I want to cry. I need to cry. I can't be strong. You think I am a bad mother/father/son/daughter.

"It could be worse. I know this person who . . ." A griever thinks: I don't care! I am in the worst pain imaginable, why are you talking to me about someone else?

Source: <https://whatyourgrief.com/what-not-to-say-after-a-death/>



Tips for Difficult Members

In dealing with difficult group members, support group facilitators must learn a delicate combination of control mixed with kindness. This sort of assertive caring directly addresses problems with the group without insulting or offending members. You may use assertive caring during a meeting to get the discussion back on track, or you may wish to speak to the member in private after the meeting.

Times to use assertive caring

- When a member is often late to meetings
- When a member talks too much, monopolizing the discussion
- When a member rejects every suggestion that others make - the "yes, but" phenomenon
- When a member appears to have problems that are more than the group can handle
- When a member interrupts others or brings up inappropriate or irrelevant subjects
- When a member's problem doesn't match up with what the group is meant to address

Steps to assertive caring

1. Show that you understand the member's position or dilemma: State that you understand the reason(s) behind the member's negative behavior. Use "I" or "we" statements, which show how her/his behavior affects you and the group. For example, "I know things are difficult for you, but right now we're trying to figure out what ____ can do about child care."
2. Set limits: Gently but firmly correct the behavior. Explain your reasons; letting the member know why you need to change the situation will make him more likely to cooperate. For example, "I know things are difficult for you, but right now we're trying to figure out what ____ can do about child care, and it's hard to do when you keep interrupting."
3. Suggest an alternative: Explain what you'd like to see the member do instead of the negative behavior. For example, "I know things are difficult for you, but right now we're trying to figure out what ____ can do about child care, and it's hard to do when you keep interrupting. I wonder if we could wait to talk about your problem until after we've come to some conclusions about what ____ can do."
4. Get the member's agreement on the alternative: Make sure the member understands what is being asked of her/him and agrees to do it. For example, "I know things are difficult for you right now, but we're trying to figure out what ____ can do about child care right now, and it's hard to do when you keep interrupting. I wonder if we could wait to talk about your problem until after we've come to some conclusions about what ____ can do. Is that okay with you?"



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