

Building Compassion-Based Relationships with Families & Other Caregivers

Section 12

Responding to Challenging Interactions with Families

Partnering with families in health care settings has been associated with improved clinical outcomes for clients and decreased stress for providers, but dealing with challenging family dynamics can also be a common source of stress for providers.

However, responding collaboratively to challenging family situations and maintaining a positive partnership can be made easier when appropriate skills and strategies are applied.

The following strategies have been adapted from Zaider et al.'s (2016) *Responding to challenging interactions with families: A training module for inpatient oncology nurses*. Read through each strategy and think of a time when either you have utilized it or could have utilized it to ease a tense or challenging situation in the past. **Consider role-playing or discussing each in pairs or as a group.**

1. Checking your emotional posture, encourages providers to become mindful of any emotional vigilance during an interaction with a family. The purpose of this strategy is to empower providers to pause and attend to their own stress so that they can respond skillfully. Providers are encouraged to rate their "emotional temperature" (1–10) and take steps to shift their stance from reactive to curious. The 3-minute Breathing Space (or any brief mindfulness strategy discussed in this toolkit) is an exercise drawn from Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs that can be incorporated here as a simple tool for disengaging from the anxiety of a situation, witnessing it without judgment, and making a clear-minded choice about how to respond. Providers are encouraged to practice appreciative listening and slow down the natural impulse to problem-solve.

2. Becoming an ally to the family, emphasizes the benefits of acknowledging the multiple perspectives in a family. This is accomplished by eliciting each member's concerns, identifying overlap among stated concerns, highlighting positive intentions, and identifying aspects of the problem that the provider and family can unite around. Reinforcing the family's unique expertise is also encouraged as a means of aligning with the family and engaging them as a resource to each other and to the health care team.

3. Frame choices, describes ways to address differing perspectives between the family and provider, enabling the provider to maintain collaboration and support to the family. Providers are encouraged to be transparent with the family about what choices are available to them and the parameters of their role (e.g., expectations within the particular health care setting). This strategy emphasizes the importance of reinforcing the positive intentions of the provider, even when at variance with the family's wishes.

4. Respond empathically, involves acknowledging, validating, and normalizing sources of distress and/or mistakes made. Skills include normalizing the family's experiences, conveying that concerns are being taken seriously, and, when applicable, reframing anger as a dimension of worry and grief.

5. Block escalation if inevitable, recognizes those occasions when the provider or the family becomes too distressed to maintain constructive discussion, at which point facilitating a transition to a "timeout" with a clear plan to return is an encouraged solution.