

When Someone You Love Is Upset, Ask This One Question

Offering support can be tricky, but experts say this technique helps.



By Jancee Dunn

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Last September, I got a phone call from my sister Heather, a special-education teacher at an elementary school in upstate New York.

Heather — known as Mrs. Stella to her students — had experienced a challenging week. Her pupils were settling into a new school year, but some of them had become agitated in class.

“What do you do when a kid is emotionally overwhelmed?” I asked. Many teachers at her school, she told me, ask students a simple question: Do you want to be helped, heard or hugged?

The choice gives children a sense of control, which is important when they're following school rules all day, Heather said. “And all kids handle their emotions differently,” she explained. “Some need a box of tissues, or they want to talk about a problem on the bus, and I'll just listen.”

It struck me that this question could be just as effective for adults.

Throughout our marriage, if I told my husband Tom about a problem I was having, he would start troubleshooting before I was done talking. He meant well, but his suggestions made me crankier. Sometimes I just craved a silent bear hug.

Now, when one of us is upset about something (if I'm honest, it's usually me), the other will ask that question. It has been a game changer over the last few months. It clarifies needs. It de-escalates swirling emotions. It helps us take positive action.

Each option — an embrace, thoughtful but solicited advice or an empathetic ear — has the power to comfort and calm. Receiving a hug from your partner increases levels of oxytocin, the bonding hormone, and helps dial down stress. There's evidence that being heard, known as “high-quality listening,” can reduce defensiveness during difficult and intimate conversations. And some research suggests that couples who give each other supportive advice have higher relationship satisfaction.

But different emotions require different responses, said Dr. Elizabeth Easton, the director of psychotherapy at Pathlight Mood and Anxiety Center in Denver. “So one response, like reassurance, may work well for anxiety but may further infuriate someone who is frustrated,” she said.

Your preferred style may be incompatible with your partner's, said Jada Jackson, a licensed mental health counselor in Dallas. “When I'm working with my couples, I will say to them, ‘Listen, don't assume that because you want a hug, or to fix things, that your partner is going to want the same.’”

Even in her own marriage, Dr. Jackson said, “I tell my husband, ‘Don't try to fix it all the time.’ Sometimes I just want to vent.”

Problem-solvers might try to repair things for their own satisfaction, she added, “not necessarily because they want the other person to feel better.” (A 2018 study published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that giving advice can enhance the adviser's “sense of power.”) And unsolicited feedback can add another layer of tension, Dr. Jackson said.

Someone who is upset may already be aware of solutions, said Frank Castro, a clinical psychologist in New York and California, “but they just may want to sit with feeling frustrated or disappointed before they move on to problem-solving,” he said.

Or you may move in for a reassuring hug, “but your partner is like a prickly cactus,” Dr. Castro said, and is not in the mood to be touched.

Finding out whether your loved one wants to be helped, heard or hugged “is really asking, ‘How can I meet your needs?’” Dr. Jackson said.

By posing the question, you're not making assumptions, Dr. Castro explained. "You're asking permission — and also being very intentional — which is a sign of empathy."

When Tom asks me what I need, it shortens the amount of time I spend being worked up. I take a minute to pause, assess and answer: Most often, it's simply a hug.

"That's usually what my students say, too," Heather said.

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