

Responding to Disclosures

This document is adapted from Jack.org's many resources to train and equip young leaders to take action for mental health in their communities across Canada.

Mental health advocacy is all about starting conversations about mental health, often with folks who've never had these conversations before. Further, many people struggle in silence, not knowing who to talk to or fearing the negative responses they might get if they speak up.

These two facts combined mean that we're likely to meet with individuals disclosing that they're struggling and/or reaching out for help as we pursue advocacy work. This isn't a bad thing! It is, however, extremely important that if this happens, we're ready to respond appropriately, safely, and with compassion.

Counselling someone with mental health struggles requires a lot of training and practice, but responding in a safe way can actually be quite straightforward. In this resource, we've outlined some tips to follow if you're met with disclosures in your mental health advocacy work. These should help you respond in a way that is appropriate, maintains boundaries, and points the individual to help if needed.

The Dos and Don'ts of Responding to Disclosures

In any situation where someone discloses distress, it's important to respond quickly and appropriately. In your personal life, your responses should serve to offer support. It's important to show you care, ask questions, listen with empathy, and support people close to you as they seek help. This is appropriate for supporting a loved one with whom you have a meaningful, ongoing relationship.

Your response will be quite different, however, if the person disclosing a struggle is not a friend or family member. It's important to remember that you're not friends with this individual, and you won't be able to provide ongoing support (as this would not be appropriate or safe). In this situation, it's inappropriate to do many of the things you might do in your personal relationships.

Keep the following tips in mind if you're in a situation where you must respond to a mental health disclosure. To keep in mind if you're in a situation where you must respond to a mental health disclosure in your role with Jack.org.

DO

Respond within 12 hours

It's extremely important that any disclosures are responded to as quickly as possible – and within no more than 12 hours. If an individual is in severe distress and/or at risk of harming themselves or someone else, you can't let a message go unresponded to.

If you're corresponding via text message and aren't responding immediately, ensure that read receipts are turned off or the message is marked as unread, so that the person who has reached out does not think they're being ignored.

Validate their feelings

This is the only thing that's consistent in both a personal and professional relationship. It's of the utmost importance that you always begin a message by validating someone's feelings and the fact that they've reached out for support. You can say: it sounds like you're going through a hard time. Thanks so much for reaching out. This is the first step to feeling better, and we know it can be a hard one.

Reinforce your role

It's important to declare your role and your boundaries right away. Unless you're a trained counsellor, you don't have the ability to appropriately support this individual, and it's important to say so up front. You can say: I have to let you know that I'm not a trained counsellor, and I'm not equipped to offer support, but I do know some service options.

Direct them to help

Make sure you don't just reject them and leave them without options for support. While it's important to say that you're not a service provider, you can always direct them to the appropriate resources. We encourage you to look up local resources in your community so you can be as

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specific as possible. You can find local resources at www.jack.org/resources. Kids Help Phone is available 24/7 for any young person across Canada.

Close the conversation

This is where things differ most greatly from a personal conversation. It's important that you don't leave your response open or warranting further discussion. Resist the urge to ask questions, check back later, or say you're there for them as they seek services. This isn't to be cold but to maintain appropriate boundaries.

DON'T

Don't counsel the individual

You're not a counsellor, and you shouldn't act like one. It's important to preserve this boundary. If you act like a counsellor, someone might be less likely to seek appropriate support elsewhere as they feel their needs are being met through you. We're not saying you should be cold. You should be warm and validating but focus on directing this person to an appropriate resource.

Don't ask questions

Your first instinct in these moments will be to ask questions. That's the best practice for being supportive, and it's only natural. However, in this situation, it's important that you don't ask questions. This is because you don't want to get into a back and forth dialogue. You want to share important information and wish them well.

Don't keep an open conversation

Make sure any information you intend to give is conveyed in a single message. This is so that you limit back and forth interaction. Don't add in messages like, "let me know how it goes!" or "check back any time!" You would absolutely say these to your friends and family, but it's not appropriate here.

Sample message

Thank you for reaching out. I'm so sorry to see that you've been struggling in the way you describe. It's important that I let you know that I'm not a counsellor and I'm unable to provide supportive assistance to you. However, help is available and reaching out is the first step.

There are many local avenues you can take to access support. I'd like to suggest that you connect with a teacher or guidance counsellor at your school, your family doctor, or visit your nearest emergency room if you're still feeling this way. You can also consider calling a crisis line like Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or using Kids Help Phone's web chat resource at kidshelpphone.ca.

If you're looking for another type of mental health service, you can consult this website to find the right fit for you: apps.kidshelpphone.ca/resourcesaroundme/welcome.

Responding to a phone call

On a phone call, it might be harder to direct someone away and keep the conversation closed, but the same rules apply. By avoiding questions, validating, and directing folks to appropriate supports, you should be able to have a warm and supportive conversation that helps individuals find alternative support.

An additional consideration is if they state they're at risk of hurting themselves or someone else. If this is the case, you should call 9-1-1 and alert them of a mental health emergency.

Responding in person

In person, it may be difficult to keep the conversation closed, and you may need to spend more time validating and listening to the individual to avoid rejecting them. Even so, it's important to avoid questions, reinforce your role, and direct them to services if needed. If it seems as though there's a mental health emergency (i.e. they're at risk of harming themselves or someone else), call 9-1-1.

Age and affiliation

If the disclosure comes from a minor at a high school or affiliated with another community agency, it's mandatory that you alert a staff member of the school or agency so they can follow up with the minor and ensure they get the help they need.

If the disclosure comes from a young adult affiliated with a post-secondary school, it's not mandatory that you reach out to the school directly. However, if the young adult says things that suggest they're at risk of harming themselves or someone else, you should make every effort to contact their campus security or call 9-1-1.