

# Assist by Caring Today:

## *What you can do to help farm families in distress*

**Kansas State University  
Agricultural Experiment Station and  
Cooperative Extension Service**

### **Begin With Listening**

Effective helping begins with good listening. Good listening means really understanding what the other person is saying to you.

#### ***Barriers to Good Listening***

- *Listening with “half an ear.”* You must tune in and pay attention to the person talking.
- *Acting as the judge and jury.* You can't be involved in judging and still hear the whole story. Withhold judgmental statements.
- *Tuning in vs. tuning out.* If you aren't paying attention to the speaker, you're missing information.
- *Turning off ideas you don't agree with.* When your mind slams shut, your ears do, too.
- *Jumping to conclusions.* Listening involves entering into the other person's frame of reference, not being caught up in your own assumptions.

### ***Listen to Help: Active Listening***

Active listening is an understanding response which encourages the other person to talk or continue talking. It helps you establish a helping relationship, gain information and understand what the other person is experiencing. It fosters a trusting relationship. Active listening helps the other person to feel accepted and understood.

Here are several ways to demonstrate that you are actively listening:

- *Saying “Mm Hm” or nodding.* These simple responses say “I'm hearing you.”
- *Eye contact.* Look the speaker in the eye. Focus your attention on this person without trying to do some other activity while listening. True, you may be able to do a task and hear what is said, but the speaker will *feel* unimportant, not heard, and discouraged.
- *Lean forward.* This body gesture says “I'm interested.”
- *Silence.* Silence can be a powerful way to communicate acceptance and encouragement. It can say “You are important to me. I'm willing to wait as you gather your thoughts. I can let you say what you're thinking in your own way.” You communicate impatience when you interrupt, do too much prodding or finish others' sentences when they falter. That's a sure way to hinder a relationship.
- *Question.* Ask a question that cannot be answered by “yes” or “no” to get more information or help the speaker begin sharing with you. Use questions sparingly.

Example: “What happened when you tried to fill out the loan restructuring forms?”

- *Paraphrase.* Without interrupting, restate what has been said in your own words. If you have misunderstood, the speaker can give more correct information. For example:

Speaker: “My adult children tell me I should sell out now and move in with them. They say they'll take care of everything.”

Listener: “Your children want to take care of you.”

- *Reflect feelings.* Without interrupting, respond to or give a name to the feelings you hear in what the other person says or does. This not only furthers the conversation, but gives you and the speaker insight into emotional issues that might be hiding behind words. Example:

Speaker: “My adult children tell me I should sell out now and move in with them. They say they'll take care of everything.”

Listener: “ You’re not sure you want to do that.”  
Or, “Does that feel scary (or like giving up)?”

### ***Beyond Listening***

As you listen and learn more about the speaker’s situation, you may want to help. A good place to begin is by offering *supportive statements*. Respond to the speaker with a touch or a comment that offers encouragement or acceptance of the speaker’s thoughts, ideas and feelings.

For example, your client may confide “I feel like I’m going to drown in all this debt!” Your reply can help the person feel that he or she is not alone: “I certainly understand why you feel that way. I think it’s normal.”

Occasionally, you may need to confront a client with the contradiction you see between words and behavior. *Interpreting the situation* can help your client face unexpressed feelings.

For example, your client may be telling you how pleased she is that her situation is working out a particular way. But all the while, you notice how she looks sad and dejected. Your reply of “You’re telling me how happy you are, but you look pretty upset” can open doors of insight for your client that can lead to healing the hurts. It can also give you an opportunity to hear what the real issues are.

Guide your client in *determining what the actual problems are*. Your client may feel like a spouse or another person is the problem. Is the problem really the person or the person’s behavior? Maybe even circumstances? When we blame a person for our difficulties, we are effectively tearing down a relationship without solving the problem. Help your client focus on the source of the difficulties.

Guide your client in *considering courses of action* or resources for help. If your client’s needs fit your skills, perhaps you can help. Quite often the problem can’t be solved by you or the person you’re helping. In these situations, it is best to refer the person to someone else or to a group who can offer more specific assistance. This may be professional help (legal, financial, emotional, spiritual) or perhaps a support group or a supportive person.

Do not hesitate to admit that you don’t know how to solve the problem. Just be willing to help the person find someone who might know. As you make the referral, remind your client that you do care. You care enough to want the best possible help or service for that person.

Your most important gift to your clients is your listening, your acceptance and your sincere interest in them. To know you are not alone gives courage.

Several rural assistance persons around the state invite families together on a regular basis for refreshments, discussion and (sometimes) informative speakers. Many farm couples have talked of the importance of these support groups as they seek new solutions.

Think about it—what can you do to be more supportive of the farm and rural families in your area?

### ***Things to Think About:***

- How do you feel when others don’t seem to be listening and really hearing what you say?
- What can you do if you feel someone is not really listening and hearing what you have to say?
- What is one listening skill you want to try more often at home? At work?
- What can you do to be more supportive of the farm families in your area?

For more information:

Charlie Griffin, Rural Family Support Specialist,  
Farmers Assistance, Counseling and Training  
Service (FACTS), 9 Leasure Hall, Kansas State  
University, Manhattan, KS 66506

1-800-321-FARM or 913/532-6958.

## **When You’re Over Your**

### ***Here’s when to refer your client:***

- 1. when you feel persistently uncomfortable;**
- 2. when you believe that improvement is “impossible” or the situation is “hopeless”;**
- 3. when the person you visit with says, “nothing is helping” or what you provide the person isn’t helping;**
- 4. there is an obvious change in speech, appearance;**
- 5. the person continues to be so emotional he or she can’t communicate;**

## Signs of Alcohol Abuse, Depression and Suicide

When rural families experience continuing stress over a long period of time, they may be vulnerable to excessive use of alcohol, depression or suicidal thoughts. Keep the following in mind as signs or symptoms of distress.

### *Signs of Alcohol Abuse*

**Early signs:** Sneaking drinks, gulping first drinks, unwillingness to discuss drinking, guilty feelings about drinking, more frequent memory blanks.

**Addictive signs:** Conspicuous drinking, aggressive flashes, grandiose or showy behavior, personal relationships devalued, decreased sexual drive, loss of friends, unreasonable resentments, marked self-pity, behavior becomes alcohol-centered.

**Chronic signs:** Regular morning drinking, tremors, prolonged binges or continuous drinking, impaired thinking, loss of alcohol tolerance.

### *Signs of Depression.*

**Appearance:** sad face, slow movements, unkempt look, weight loss or gain.

**Physical problems:** sleeping problems, decreased sexual interest, fatigue.

**Unhappy feelings:** feeling sad, hopeless, discouraged, listless, empty inside.

**Negative thoughts:** "I'm a failure." "No one cares." "It's hopeless."

**Reduced activity:** "Doing anything is just too much effort." "I give up."

**People problems:** "I don't want anyone to see me." "I can't talk to anyone."

**Guilt and low self-esteem:** "It's all my fault." "I should be punished."

### *Signs of Suicidal Intent*

**Anxiety or depression:** Severe, intense feelings of anxiety or depression.

**Withdrawal or isolation:** Withdrawn, alone, lack of friends.

**Helpless and hopeless:** Sense of complete powerlessness, a hopeless feeling.

**Alcohol abuse:** Alcoholism and suicide are frequently linked.

**Previous suicidal attempts:** There may have been previous attempts without success.

**No options:** Likely to feel he or she can no longer cope with problems and that suicide may be the only way out.

**Cries for help:** Making a will, giving possessions away, making statements such as "I'm calling it quits" or "Maybe my family would be better off without me." ALL cries for help should be taken seriously.

**Note:** Your first contact with a family undergoing chronic stress may not be with the alcohol abuser or with the depressed or suicidal person. It may be with a family member who is worried, anxious or concerned about the other person or fearful for his or her safety. You can help the concerned person sort out his or her feelings; you can also help this person reach out and find help for the troubled family member.

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6. there is ongoing deterioration of life (social and physical);
7. all the person discusses are physical complaints;
8. there is a sudden onset of memory confusion;
9. substance abuse;
10. hallucinations, delusions or severe pathology;
11. threats of self harm or harm to others;
12. aggression and abuse (verbal and physical);
13. if the situation seems horrible or unbearable;  
*and most importantly,*
14. if you're unsure, then refer!

## How to Refer a Person for Help

1. Be aware of agencies and resources available in your community. Get to know the professionals and volunteers in your community who can help—find out what services they offer and what their limitations are. Be sure to touch base with the following: Extension, social services, mental health, community action, food pantries (often church-sponsored) and support groups.

2. Listen for signs and symptoms that the person or family needs help that you can't provide (i.e., legal advice, financial advice, personal counseling). Remember, you are not a financial advisor or personal counselor. But you can link the person or family with resources that can help them deal better with their situation.

3. Assess what agency or community resource would be most appropriate to address the person's (or family's) problem. This is why it's important to know what community resources are available. If you have any questions about whether an organization could be of help, give them a call and ask.

4. Discuss the referral with the person or family. You might say "I sense that you need help with \_\_\_\_\_. I think \_\_\_\_\_ organization can help you." It's even more useful if you can say "I know of a farm family that went to \_\_\_\_\_ organization and they found it to be very helpful." In short, if you know of farm families who have been helped, share their experience but keep their names confidential.

5. Explore the individual's or family's willingness to contact the community resource. You might say "Does it make sense to you to contact \_\_\_\_\_?" or "How do you feel about seeking help from this agency?" If the person or family feels comfortable making the contact, simply urge them to do so.

6. If the person or family is unwilling to make the contact or if there is some danger if action is not taken, you should take the initiative:

a. Call the agency and ask to speak with the intake worker (if there is one).

b. Identify yourself and your relationship with the person or family.

c. State what you think the person's or family's needs are (depressed, suicidal, needs food or fuel, needs legal advice).

d. Ask the agency what follow-up action they will take and what (if anything) you can do.

7. Try to find out whether the person or family contacted the resource and whether they were helped. Don't pry for details—just make sure they know that you care and that you want them to get the help they need.

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