

**Table 11.1**  
**Emotionally Supportive Conversations: Guidelines for Speaking**

**Talk about things that made you feel good and bad during the day** (Rather than just recounting the events of your day).

**Talk about what it was like to be you.** Don't just give details about the situations that made you feel good or bad— talk about what it was like to be you in the situations.

**Even mildly frustrating situations are worth talking about.** If you are the kind of person who doesn't like to make a big deal about your feelings, you might have to really think hard to remember times when you recently felt bad. If there were no situations that produced strong feelings, focus on small changes in your emotional state. It's rare to have a perfectly "flat-line" day when it comes to your emotions. There are usually little ups and downs. Try to remember these.

**Take your time.** As you are talking, take the time to think about how you felt (or are feeling). Sometimes, you might need to stop for a few moments and "sense" how you feel about the whole thing. Otherwise, you'll end up just describing the details of what happened rather than what it was like for you inside. Often the specific quality of feelings or the reasons why we feel certain things only become clear when we ponder them for a few moments.

**Describe any vulnerable feelings you had, even if you only felt them mildly.** (see the list below)

<input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed	<input type="checkbox"/> Unlovable	<input type="checkbox"/> Confused
<input type="checkbox"/> Insecure	<input type="checkbox"/> Lonely	<input type="checkbox"/> Betrayed
<input type="checkbox"/> Powerless	<input type="checkbox"/> Sad	<input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate
<input type="checkbox"/> Helpless	<input type="checkbox"/> Guilty	<input type="checkbox"/> Unimportant
<input type="checkbox"/> Discouraged	<input type="checkbox"/> Afraid	<input type="checkbox"/> Incompetent
<input type="checkbox"/> Unappreciated	<input type="checkbox"/> Worried	

**Come up for air!** Pause every once in a while to give your partner a chance to react to what you are saying.

**If you want advice, say so.** Otherwise, remind your partner that you just want him/her to listen and try to understand your feelings.

**Table 11.2**  
**Emotionally Supportive Conversations: Guidelines for Listening**

Attempts to cheer up one's partner often backfire, because the partner who is feeling bad interprets the "cheering" attempts of his or her partner to be evidence that the "cheering" partner is uncomfortable with the "feeling bad" partner's feelings and wants the "feeling bad" partner to "get over it." Well-intended comments like...

- "Don't let it get you down"
- "I'm sure everything is going to work out"
- "Maybe she didn't mean to hurt you."
- "Things aren't as bad as they seem." "
- "Let's figure out what to do about this problem!"

are often heard as...

- "I can't handle you being so upset!"
- "I don't want to understand how you are feeling; I just want you to stop feeling this way."
- "Would you stop being so sensitive? "You're over-reacting!"
- "You shouldn't feel that way!"
- "Enough said....now let's move on!" or "I'd rather help you change the way you feel than really understand how you are feeling."

**Avoid trying to make your partner feel better until you have spent time helping him/her feel understood.** It's not that advice or "focusing on the positive" comments are never helpful. It's a matter of timing. First help your partner feel understood, then explore different avenues for dealing with the problem situation, *but only if your partner asks for it*. Actually, you may find that your help in advice-giving or problem-solving isn't even necessary, because if your partner feels understood and supported, s/he may automatically feel better and know what to do. Feeling understood is often the most critical factor in feeling better. So, when you sense that your partner is feeling bad, try beginning with the following:

- Ask yourself: "Can I be comfortable allowing my partner to feel bad for a few minutes while I keep him/her company?"
- Slow down. Communicate that you have time to listen.
- Avoid giving your reactions to what your partner is saying.
- Avoid giving advice.

**When your partner begins to talk...**

**Ask for more details.** (The goal is for your partner to go away from the conversation feeling that you understand exactly what it was like for him/her, and to feel your support.)

- "What about the situation was the most upsetting to you?"
- "What was that like for you? What were you thinking? How did you feel?"
- "What was the worst about it?"

- “How long did you feel upset?” “Are you still upset?”
- “What did you do?”
- “What did you feel like doing?”
- “Why do you think that happened?”

**Give Sympathy:** “I’m sorry you had a hard day.” “I think you’ve had a harder day than me... How about if you just try to relax for a while I take care of the kids.” “I don’t like it when people treat you that way.”

**Give emotional support:** I’m on your side. We’re in this together. I’ll help you if you want me to.

**Be affectionate:** “Why don’t you come over here and let me rub your shoulders for a few minutes?” “Here, you put your feet up while I get you something to drink.” “Here, let me hold you for a minute.”