

Connecting in Relationships: Validating Silence

When a person you care about is closed to attempts for connection, it can be painful for all involved, especially if you interpret their behavior as disrespectful or rejecting. Although they may come across as “wanting space”, be assured that there are strong (and often vulnerable) underlying emotions that need attention. The approach described below may seem contrary to what common sense would suggest but it’s likely to help them to open up, connect and seek support.

Step 1

Validate your loved one’s silence. Convey that you can understand why he or she is closed to your attempts for connection, and from three perspectives:

- a. Validate from your loved one’s perspective:

*“I can imagine why you’d not want to speak to me **because** it can be really uncomfortable to talk to others about vulnerable feelings.”*

- b. Validate from the perspective of the relationship:

*“I can understand why it would be hard for you to talk to me about your feelings **because** we haven’t always been in the habit of talking about the tough stuff.”*

- c. Validate from your own perspective*:

*“I can imagine why you would be silent **because** I haven’t always been understanding or accepting of your feelings in the past.”*

**This perspective is likely to be the most powerful.*

Step 2

Validate the emotional states (anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, hopelessness) that you believe may underlie the silence / resistance to open up. Remember: making guesses is often better than asking questions.

“I can imagine that underneath the silence, you might be feeling angry because... because . . ., because . . .”

“I can also imagine that underneath the resistance, you might feel sadness because . . . because . . . because . . .” (Repeat with fear, loneliness, hopelessness...)

Step 3

Now, you may wish to communicate to your loved one (a) that there is space for them to build trust, (b) that they can take the time needed, and that (c) there is no pressure for them to engage with you in this moment. You may also communicate that (d) you will be there for your loved one no matter what.

Meeting silence in this way conveys understanding and respect, and this goes a long way toward maintaining connection, even encouraging your loved one to eventually open up. In fact, we’ve found that it is difficult for many to remain silent or disconnected when met with this type of unconditional support.

