

# DO'S TO REMEMBER

## Suggestions for Preventing and Responding to Distress and Distressing Situations

Shelly Weaverdyck

---

Listed here are tips for helping a person who is in distress or when there is a distressing situation. They are particularly relevant to a person with many cognitive needs. More details and specifics are available in other **CAIS Handouts** and in the *Cognitive Abilities and Intervention Strategies (CAIS): Questions to Ask* and *CAIS: Intervention Strategies* by S. Weaverdyck at <https://www.improvingmipractices.org>

1. **Respect** this person. Get to know their strengths, concerns, desires, and preferences. Learn about their past by talking with people who knew them. Examine yourself to address any negative feelings you may have about this person.
2. **Ask yourself “Why?”**. For example, why is this person acting this way, doing this, saying this, feeling like this?
3. Notice ways that **you are engaging in behavior** that may be distressing to this person. For example, are you making too much noise, or talking too much or too fast for this person at this time?
4. Try to see the situation **as this person might see it**. Try to “sit in their skin” or “walk in their shoes”. **Accommodate their sensory, cognitive, and motor changes**.
5. Figure out what this person might be **feeling**.
6. Respond to this person’s feelings. Reassure them. **Address the distress**, not simply their behavior.
7. Remove whatever is triggering distress for this person, or is causing this person to act in a way that is distressing to others. **Modify the environment**, your **interactions** with this person, or the **task**, rather than trying to change this person or their behavior.
8. Remind yourself this person most likely **has difficulty controlling** what they are saying or doing, or at least stopping themselves in time from doing something they know they shouldn’t do.
9. Try to recognize this person’s **cognitive abilities** (that is, their cognitive strengths and needs) and how they may be making it easier or harder for this person in this situation. How are they affecting this person’s behavior, comments, and ability to understand and respond at this moment?
10. Watch this person for evidence of past or current **physical, emotional, or sexual pain**, discomfort, or trauma that may be increasing distress for this person in this situation. Move slowly, gently, and with respect and compassion.
11. Be **calm and kind**, regardless of the situation. Avoid embarrassing this person. Help them save face. Avoid calling attention to their behavior or difficulty in doing a task.
12. **Leave** for a while if this person and others are safe and if it would help this person and you. Figure out what you can do differently next time to be more helpful.

13. When this person is ready, **return** and try again to help them with the task or to talk with them.
14. At all times, help this person feel **safe** and **comfortable**, regardless of the task you are doing with them. Help them feel relaxed. Communicate verbally and nonverbally that you are on “their side” against any problem they are having. Avoid correcting, contradicting, or arguing with them.
15. Remember, you are here to help this person. This person has a right to make their **own decisions**. You are here to help them make the decisions, not to make the decisions for them.
16. **Watch** this person while you are with them. Look for the first signs of discomfort or confusion so you can immediately adapt the environment or the way you are interacting with them to accommodate their needs and desires. **Address the distress immediately before it escalates.**
17. **Learn** about specific cognitive abilities and how they affect a person’s ability to understand and respond to other people and their environment. Learn about changes or differences in the brain and how they can affect a person’s cognitive abilities.
18. Be **creative** with your responses and interactions with this person. Try new strategies when the ones you are using don’t work.
19. Create or adapt each intervention to each situation and each person. **Individualize** your interventions. Build on strengths and compensate for or adapt to changes in abilities.
20. Intervene **only if** there is **distress** or when necessary. If no one is hurt or distressed by a person’s comments or behavior, or if a person’s comments or behavior do not indicate this person is in distress, then simply accommodate the comments and behavior.
21. **Intervene when:**
  - a. This **person** is not **safe** and the risk is not justified (that is, the risk of harm and amount of harm truly outweigh the benefits).
  - b. **Other people** are not **safe**.
  - c. **Other people’s property** is not safe and is too valuable.
  - d. This **person’s property** is not safe and the risk is not justified.
22. Keep in mind your **goals** in this general order of priority:
  - a. Help this person **feel safe** and **feel good** about themselves and about life in general.
  - b. Prevent and respond to behavior or actions: that are **dangerous** to this person or others, that are **distressing** to this person or others, that indicate or express a **desire or need**. Meet desires and needs.
  - c. Help this person’s brain and **cognitive skills grow** as much as possible, to build on their particular cognitive strengths, and to accommodate and compensate for their particular cognitive needs.
  - d. Help this person more easily, independently, and successfully do **tasks** they **want** to do, as well as tasks they **need** to do that will allow them to do other tasks they want to do (for example, learning to walk so they can walk in the park).
23. Remind yourself of what you **like** and **admire** about this person.
24. Rest and **take care of yourself**. Helping a person with many cognitive needs can be exhausting, emotionally, mentally, and physically. Avoid taking distressing events, behavior, and comments personally. Care for yourself so that you may appreciate, respect, and feel warmly towards this person more easily.