

# RESPONSE TO ACUTE DISTRESS

## Suggestions of Questions to Consider when Assisting a Person with Cognitive Changes

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These are key questions to ask yourself when **responding immediately** to a distressing situation or to a person who is in acute distress as evidenced by their emotional expression or behavior.

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 on the Improving MI Practices website at <https://www.improvingmipractices.org>

### 1. Assessing the situation:

#### Gathering information to analyze key aspects of the situation:

What are the immediate aspects I need to address? For example:

- a. Are this person and all other people (including myself) **safe**?  
(Physically and emotionally)
- b. What is the current action/behavior/evidence of feelings?  
(Look for **verbal** and **nonverbal** expressions of emotions.)
- c. **Why** is this situation occurring?
- d. What will likely happen next if there is **no intervention**?
- e. Who will be or might be **hurt (physically and/or emotionally)**?
- f. What needs to be **done first** to prevent someone getting hurt?
- g. What is the status and role of **four factors** in this situation?  
(**Person, Environment, Other people, Task**)

### 2. Discerning feelings:

#### Recognizing and responding to this person's feelings and the feelings of other people:

What matters most to this person at this moment?

What matters most to other people at this moment?

How will I acknowledge and transcend my own personal reactions in order to attend to the immediate needs of this person and other people who are in distress? For example:

- a. How do **I feel**?
- b. Why do I feel this way?
- c. How will my feelings affect the outcome here?
- d. How will I set aside my feelings now and deal with my feelings later?
- e. How does **this person feel**?
- f. Why does this person feel this way?
- g. Are this person's **cognitive abilities** being addressed? Is this person understanding, recognizing, and using information they are receiving? Are they able to recognize and express their needs and desires?
- h. Is there a past or current experience of emotional, physical, or sexual discomfort, pain, or trauma that is affecting this situation?
- i. How are this person's feelings playing a role here?
- j. How will I best respond (verbally or nonverbally) to this person's feelings?
- k. What is the status and role of this person's other feelings, physical strengths and needs, cognitive strengths and needs, etc.?  
(Closely observe this person's face, body, words, sounds, actions.)

- l. How do **other people feel**?
- m. Why do they feel this way?
- n. Are their **cognitive abilities** being addressed? Are other people understanding, recognizing, and using information they are receiving? Are they able to recognize and express their own needs and desires?
- o. Is there a past or current experience of emotional, physical, or sexual discomfort, pain, or trauma that is affecting this situation?
- p. How are the feelings of other people playing a role here?
- q. How will I best respond (verbally or nonverbally) to the feelings of other people?
- r. What is the status and role of other people's other feelings, physical strengths and needs, cognitive strengths and needs, etc.?  
(Closely observe other people's faces, bodies, words, sounds, actions.)

### 3. **Generating intervention options:**

#### **Choosing the best intervention to try first:**

What needs to be done and what results are best for all involved?

- a. What are all the **intervention options** possible at this time?
- b. What is the **best outcome** in this situation?
- c. How will I help this person **feel better and be safe**?
- d. How will I help all people in this situation feel better and be safe?
- e. How will I **avoid embarrassing** this person and other people?
- f. **How will I know** when this person and other people are feeling better and are safe?
- g. Of the intervention options, which will be **most effective** most quickly?
- h. Of the intervention options, which will involve **as little change** as possible?
- i. Of the intervention options, which will **least upset** each person involved?

### 4. **Evaluating the attempted intervention:**

#### **Looking for evidence the intervention worked and for other options of intervention:**

What are the results of the intervention?

Is the distress alleviated?

What more do I need to do now to intervene?

- a. Are this person and all other people (including myself) feeling better?  
(Better enough to declare the situation resolved?)
- b. Is the **person most distressed** or who first recognized the distress in the situation, feeling better and acknowledged?
- c. Are all **other people** feeling better (and acknowledged as needed)?
- d. Will this intervention reduce the likelihood of the situation reoccurring?
- e. What other interventions might have worked as well or even better?
- f. **Do I need to do more** of this intervention or try another intervention?

### 5. **Describing the situation for proactive intervention planning and documentation:**

What factual and neutral words will I use to describe and document the feelings, events, and behavior or actions that occurred in this particular situation? For example:

- a. Who needs to know about this situation? (and why, how, where?)
- b. How will I be **objective** and **accurate** in my description?
- c. How will I avoid implying motives or emotions when describing behavior or actions?
- d. How will I describe the expressions of feelings I see, hear and feel?
- e. How will I avoid ascribing the feelings or behavior to a diagnosis?
- f. How will I use words to "draw a picture" of the situation?
- g. How will I document new information, lessons learned, or recommendations?