

Connecting in Relationships: Validating Silence

When a loved one is shutdown, the silence can be painful for all involved, especially if you interpret their behavior as disrespectful or rejecting. Although your loved one 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 your loved one to open up, connect and seek support.

Step 1

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

- a) Validate from your loved one’s perspective
*“I can understand why you are silent **because** I know you find it uncomfortable to talk to others about your feelings.”*
- b) Validate from the perspective of the relationship
*“I can understand why it’s hard for you to talk to me about your feelings **because** you and I haven’t always been in the habit of talking about the tough stuff.”*
- c) Validate from your own perspective*
*“I can understand 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 emotions (anger, sadness, fear) and/or emotional states (loneliness, hopelessness, helplessness, resentment) that you believe may underlie the silence and shutdown behaviors. Remember: making guesses is better than asking questions.

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

Step 3

Now, you may wish to communicate 1) that there is space for them to build the trust, 2) that they can take their time and that 3) there is no pressure for them to engage with you at this time. You may also suggest that 4) they can count on you no matter what. Meeting silence in this way conveys understanding and respect - and this goes a long way in maintaining connection, even encouraging your loved one to eventually open up. In fact, we’ve found that it is very difficult for many to remain silent when met with this type of unconditional support.