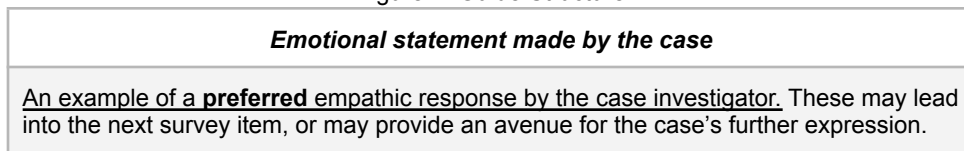


Empathic Communication in Public Health: A Responding Guide for Difficult Situations [Abridged]

Guide Overview

This communication guide outlines examples of specific situations that are difficult to respond to, and pairs them with examples of how to respond with empathy. This guide depicts these difficult case statements as rows with bold, italic text. Beneath each scenario is an example of an empathic response (underlined) that can lead to a factual response or survey prompt (Figure 1). The responses use empathic communication to show the case that you are witnessing the emotion, rather than moving to the survey without acknowledging emotion. There is no one right answer to any difficult case statement.

Figure 1: Guide Structure



My Go-To General Empathic Statements:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Resistance

Resistance: Privacy Concerns

“My COVID status should be between me and my doctor. Why the heck are you calling me?”

“I can tell that you are careful about sharing your information with a reputable source, and I respect that you take your confidentiality seriously. I do too. I am calling on behalf of the health department because COVID-19 is a reportable disease, just like ebola and anthrax. This means that when someone tests positive, the county has a duty to follow up with them so that we can help stop the spread and provide resources.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“I can imagine it is a bit unexpected to get this call, and I appreciate your looking out and being careful. I am with the county health department and am here to support you and the community. Do you have any questions I can help to answer for you?”

“Why do you need to know my ethnicity?”

“I can understand that this may be a personal question and privacy is important to you. I take your privacy seriously too. When you provide [demographic information], it enables the county to...”

“Why should I have to tell you that?”

“Thank you for voicing these concerns. I want to make sure to support you in whatever you feel comfortable answering. Is it ok if I tell you where the information goes and how we protect it?”

Resistance: Government, Public Health, & Medical Mistrust

“I would prefer not to give my information to the government. I know better than the government!”

“You’re right that you know yourself and your experiences better than anyone. That’s why we really need your help. Your perspective can help us to better understand how this disease is impacting our community, and better understand how to stop the spread.”

“I feel weird giving you this. What are you doing with it again?”

“I appreciate your caution. I do not want you to answer anything that you are not comfortable with. We use this...”

“ I know my rights & this is a huge HIPAA violation.”

“It sounds like you are really knowledgeable and take your health information seriously. So do I. Because your illness is a reportable disease, the health dept. has a duty to follow up with everyone who has tested positive...”

“How did you get my information? Are you targeting me?!”

“That sounds scary. I would feel scared too. I work in public health and take your safety and the safety of the community very seriously.”

Resistance: Anger or Rudeness

“What gives you the right to call me?”

“I can imagine it is frustrating to get called out of the blue. I am calling as part of public health and we are mandated to make these calls to better support our community. We really value your input, if you would be able to let us know a little bit more about your experience...”

“Stop calling me. What kind of operation is this?”

“Thank you for letting us know that you have been receiving too many calls. It sounds like it has been frustrating. As part of the public health response to better support the community, our team is all hands on deck to reach out to those who have been affected so that we can help keep our community safe. Would you be able to share more about your concerns with me and our team?”

You’re calling me for my information but you have my results, shouldn’t you have all of this information?

“I can tell that this has been a really frustrating and tough time for you. I respect you for taking the time to talk to me today and I am happy to hold some space to hear how things are going. Hopefully by working together...”

“How much is left in this survey?”

“I hear your annoyance with this process, and I’m with you. We really value your input.”

“What is the point of this?”

“I can tell you are someone who likes to think things through, and I respect that! This question is asked so...”

[General Response to Anger]

“This is a crappy situation. I am angry too.”

Resistance: General Resistance & Apathy

“I’m fine, I’d rather not complete this survey. Nah.”

“Thank you so much for picking up the phone today and for letting me know. I hope you are hanging in there. Please call back if you would be up for sharing your experiences or if you need any resources.”

“Is it mandatory to answer this?”

“Great question. I can imagine that some of these feel personal or may be difficult to share. You can skip any question that doesn’t feel right to you, none are mandatory. Any answers you would be able to provide are very helpful for stopping the spread in our community.”

Difficult Emotions

Shame (not wanting to be found out)

“Oh. I really don’t want to give the name of my employer. I don’t want them to find out.”

“I hear you. It sounds like you are making sure your information stays private between you and me, and I respect your carefulness. Can I tell you where this information goes and what we use it for?”

“Why do you need this?”

“I can imagine this situation seems to come out of left field, and I respect your desire for privacy. We ask this to get a better idea of _____. Is that something you would feel comfortable sharing?”

“I don’t know if I want everyone to know I got this. It’s so embarrassing.”

“I don’t blame you for wanting to be cautious with your information. I can tell you don’t take this lightly and are doing the best you can. It’s really hard to know when COVID spreads.”

“I went to work. I exposed my clients!”

“This sounds like this has been weighing on you heavily.” OR “I can tell that you really care about your clients.”

High Need & Complicated Situations

“I don’t have the internet. It’s not easy for me to just go to the doctor, that’s why this got so much worse.”

“I can imagine that has been a big challenge, especially with everything going on. Are there any resources I can help connect you with so you are able to get the support you need?”

“I don’t want to lose my job if they find out it’s me. I don’t have insurance or a car, I mean, money is tight.”

“I appreciate your sharing this with me. This must feel overwhelming -- you are juggling a lot right now.”

“You can’t support me! It’s not that simple.”

“I really wish I had the right answer here. I feel for you and I’m here to help if I can.”

Grief & Other Heavy Emotions

“I should have gotten the vaccine. I was so stubborn, and look what happened!”

OR

“I have diabetes and should have been more careful.”

“I’m hearing that you are being hard on yourself. I imagine that adds a lot of pressure on top of everything you are going through.”

“My mother died of COVID. Now I have it. It’s scary.”

“I am so sorry to hear this. It must be devastating to go through this, especially without your mom. How are you holding up?”

[Proxy] “My husband is back in the hospital. I don’t know what to do.”

OR

“I just got out of the hospital for this. I’m so tired...”

“I am so sorry to hear that you/your husband has been hospitalized. I can’t imagine what you must be going through. How are you doing?”

OR

“This sounds like an awful situation to be going through. How can I support you?”

“I can’t believe I’m sick. I thought COVID was over...I just wanted things back to normal.”

“I don’t blame you for feeling this way. It has been a tough year, even before your illness.”

From your own experience:

For the full guide visit:
<https://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.2.N.164397>

Contact Laura at:
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Or use your phone camera to scan:

