

Service, Support and Success  
**The Direct Support Workers Newsletter**

**Anxiety:  
Roaming Through the Stepping Stones**

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**Background**

We work in an acute in-patient unit of the North Bay Regional Health Center that supports people with Dual Diagnosis. We support a revolving door of people as one of our program's goals is to return a person back into a safe community home as soon as possible. Some people come to us with a massive library of their history and tips on how to best support them. Sometimes though, people come with no history and a great deal of trauma.

**New Beginnings**

One night late into the evening, a person was admitted to our unit with no history and a great deal of mystery. They were in a complete panic – screaming, shouting and running away from all staff. The staff had tried many times to help this individual get out of their dirty clothes, get something to help calm them, and a warm meal.

The staff gently talked with this person, spoke clearly, offered drinks and snacks, listened, and gave time and space for the person to calm down. They did everything in their compassionate skill set to help the person calm. However, everything the staff did just seemed to aggravate the individual more who would run away, hide in corners and continue to scream in panic. Kevin got a call to come and help out as this person was escalating, and the staff supporting them did not know what else to do. They called him in order to try a new face and a new voice, which has helped in previous situations similar to this.

Kevin entered the unit and assessed the situation. He took his time, turned down the light and the volume on the TV; he mirrored the language and what the person was saying. Kevin was able to approach the individual and start a conversation with them. We were able to get the individual their medication, some food and clean clothes, we even laughed a little. There was no rush, no consequences, no force, just respect for the fellow human who needed help feeling safe.



**Hands**

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Later that week Melanie was introduced to this person and realized that language barriers had complicated the situation as the person's language of familiarity was not being spoken to them on a regular basis.

When the person's family came for a visit, Melanie took some time to ask questions of them in the hopes of gaining a stronger base of knowledge as a means of learning how to better support the person's anxiety. Melanie asked many questions of the individual's lifestyle and previous way of life. She found it helpful to clarify the stories and needs presented by the individual. The family provided feedback and helped give some insight into how to help them with their coping skills.

Melanie learned to slow down her pace and listen to the person. Most of what the person wanted in their anxiety was to be heard. She provided some compassion and empathy along with paraphrasing which made them calmer, as well as easier to understand and support. This work provided a great supportive relationship.

Part of the success from this situation was luck and timing we are sure. However, much of the success was the approach, and the time that went into learning as much as we could about the person. Following these events, we were approached by a co-worker who asked what we had done and if we would share our techniques with them.

After consulting with each other, we decided to put together the following list of what we do every time we approach a person who is experiencing anxiety.

### **One Step at a Time**

We have both been working with people who need support who also have trouble managing their anxiety levels for decades. Often we are asked how we are able to connect with an anxious person without increasing their anxiety. Through working with so many people who have a high level of anxiety or stress, we have developed some stepping stones to approaching someone while keeping the peace. Coming into any situation with a welcoming stance and a smile, followed by a nice "hello" can make a big difference in anyone's day.

It does not matter if this is your first time meeting a person or if you are approaching them a hundred times a day; every time you support, help, hold space or enter someone's proximity, you can use these ten stepping stones to help them feel safe, heard, and part of the conversation, as well as helping you stay safe.

- 1. Self Care** – We always start with the thing we have the most control over – ourselves. Before entering someone's personal space, make sure that you are in a neutral space within your own self. Begin by checking your breathing. Breathing fast and shallow will certainly increase your own anxiety and most often make the person you are supporting increase their anxiety. Be aware of your non-verbal cues. Where are your hands? How quickly and how closely are you coming towards a person? Be aware of your perfumes, your smells, your volume, as well as your position when getting closer to a person who is anxious. Take a break, ask for help, and be aware of your limits. Share your feelings; keep an open

line of communication with those you work alongside. It's always a good thing to have a plan for escape such as taking a walk outside or a quiet space to sit for a few minutes. Know who you can talk to and who will be there to listen and be supportive. Remember these self-regulating techniques can be applied in everyday situations which then becomes a best practice skill that will strengthen your coping strategies and performance.

2. **Reverse The Role** – Remember the “golden rule.” Treat everyone as you wish to be treated. Offer the people who you are supporting the highest level of respect, regardless of their past, or present situation. Treat the person as you would treat a friend or family member. Always include the person in the conversation, regardless of their perceived ability to respond and understand. Presume that the person you are working with can understand everything you are saying. Feelings are shared by all of us. Not everyone shares their feelings in the same way or is able to express themselves verbally. Key components, such as body language, facial expressions or physical acts demonstrated by the individuals that we are supporting can all be forms of communication. You do not know more or what is better. You can help someone get to a safe place.
3. **Open Your Mind** – Suspend your judgement of the person you are supporting, the situation, and any reactions that might be happening in that moment. Remember that the support is not about you, it is about the person you are supporting. Be flexible, be able to change as the situation calls for change, and do not get pulled into the situation. Be a mirror and repeat what the person is saying or needing for clarification to reassure them that you are listening. Paraphrasing the person's statement provides reassurance and makes it visibly clear to the individual that the staff is being attentive to their request and needs. Check in with your intention. Why is it that you are approaching that person? Do you really need to approach them? Will your approaching them help you or them? If someone is anxious, always make sure that you have their best interests in mind.
4. **Manners** – They call them magic words for a reason. We teach our children the importance of manners – “pleases” and “thank-yous” – but we often forget them ourselves. Even if you have worked with a person for many years, saying please and thank you offers respect, and sets a tone of appreciation. Building rapport and earning respect is one of the greatest accomplishments any of us can attain in all areas of our lives, especially working with a wide range of people.
5. **Environment** – What is going on around you? What can you do to make the room or space calmer? How bright are the lights? How loud are the noises? Who else is around making noises or possibly causing some stress to the person you are approaching. Be aware that some people are very sensitive to certain stimuli in their environment. When someone is anxious, they are often even more sensitive to what is going on in their environment. Treat each situation as unique and take time to use your senses to check in with anything that might be bothering the person who is anxious.

6. **Space** – Similar to environment, but needing its own attention is the space involved in any situation. How much space does the person have that you are approaching? Even if you are calm and are helping someone who is anxious, if you back them into a corner, they may feel increased anxiety. How close are you to the person, how close are other people? Often when someone needs help, people will crowd that person. Space is your friend and the friend of the person who needs support. People who are anxious have unique needs. Some need time and space, some need distraction. No amount of force will help a person who is anxious. Give people space and reassurance that you are there to help.
7. **Touch, Timing, Rapport** – Take your time approaching a situation. Offer a hand shake if meeting them for the first time. Try giving a high five to lighten the mood. Keep very clear boundaries. We find that taking a few minutes to observe a situation or a person before entering their space will provide a great deal of useful information that can help you in building an instant rapport. Move slowly, speak slowly and breathe. Be like the elephant – big ears and little mouth. Listen twice as much as you speak.
8. **Slowly With Results** – Take your time; this is not a race. We find that moving slower with a person who is anxious leads to the best results. Allow time for the person to process your questions. Slow down and remember that you are not going to fix any major problems here; you are just there to help calm the situation. You can find solutions later when everyone is calm. Do not look at the time or mention the time; the slower you go the faster you will have the situation resolved.
9. **Simplicity** – You are not going to fix every hole in the dam today. Be sure to keep your communication and your intentions simple. The goal is to help someone feel more comfortable, safer and less anxious. Trying to offer advice may increase stress. Listen, repeat and offer understanding. Gently remind the person of what has worked in the past when they were anxious. Provide key words or phrases that the individual can relate to when trying to cope during an intense situation or period of the day. If the anxiety involves more than one person, do not look to assign blame. Focus on getting back to a calmer state, the “whodunit” can be figured out later.
10. **Prepare for everything, expect nothing** – A person who is distressed or upset can react in unpredictable ways. You are responsible for making sure that you are safe and have a plan if the situation escalates. If you approach the person in a defensive manner showing fear of what might happen, then you are most likely going to increase the stress of that person. Be prepared to react, but also do not act or look as if you are planning to react. Be calm for yourself, and be calm for everyone involved. Firm lines and soft hearts, which I use to describe having clear boundaries, but with the utmost care and the highest standards of support possible.

Approaching an anxious person who needs support is an art that requires constant practice. Keep learning and, most importantly, keep sharing. You are not alone in this, we are all working together to be safe, caring and professional with everyone we support. Always keeping an open mind to learning new things or trying new strategies can be very beneficial with everyone around at work or at play.

Sharing is a key component of caring. The most important tip that we can offer you is to talk and share with the people with whom you work. Talk with your co-workers about what it is they do in their approaches. Talk with the people you support to learn what they like and need when they are anxious or upset. Talk with anyone who works with people and learn tips and techniques; practice them often and share them always.

### **About the authors:**

Kevin Alexander is a Developmental Service Worker at North Bay Regional Health Center. Over the past 20 years, he has travelled across Canada working with, and learning from leaders in Care, Community Developmental, and Behaviour Therapy. He is the author of the soon to be released book, "The Way of the Support Worker." His professional motto is: "Alone I travel fast. Together we travel far."

Melanie Rose is a Developmental Service Worker at North Bay Regional Health Center, and an Educational Assistant for the Near North District School Board. Melanie has been working as a front line support worker for the past six years. Prior to returning to school in 2010, she worked as a customer fulfillment specialist within the Healthcare sector for 12 years. Melanie approaches each situation with a positive outlook and encourages positivity in others.

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