

SIX LEVELS of VALIDATION

Level One: Stay Awake and Pay Attention

Show that you are paying attention to the other person through your behavior. For example, make eye contact, nod, ask questions, prompt the person to give more information. Use both verbal and nonverbal cues to demonstrate your interest. Example: “Then what happened?” “I see.” “Uh-huh.”

Level Two: Accurate Reflection

Communicate that you've heard the other person accurately. Paraphrase (don't “parrot”) what the other is sharing. Ask “Is that right?” Be nonjudgmental and matter-of-fact. Have an “of course” attitude. You don't have to agree with or like the other's perceptions or feelings. Validation isn't approval, rather it's tolerating others' feelings and demonstrating your ability to respect those feelings even if you might not have had that same reaction yourself. You are showing that the person's feelings are universal enough that you “get” what they are feeling. Example: "My therapist doesn't like me." Validation: "Sounds like you feel pretty unaccepted by your therapist."

Level Three: Stating What Hasn't Been Said Out Loud (“the unarticulated”)

Here you are trying to figure out what *else* a person might be feeling based on the clues you have. This is a skill that gets better with practice: you have to risk being wrong. You learn to “read” a person's behavior and imagine what they might be feeling, worried about, or wanting. Receiving this level of validation feels good because it's clear someone else made an effort to think about you. Check for accuracy. These aren't proclamations based on assumptions (“You are angry at your parents”) rather they're educated guesses (“I wonder if you feel helpless about the situation?”). Pay attention to feedback to figure out if you are on the right track or not. Sometimes this validation leads to a rush of intense feelings from the other person as they find themselves in a context of acceptance.

Level Four: Validating Using Past History or Biology

Even feelings that you have difficulty accepting or understanding can make sense when you put them in the context of a person's history. This level of validation demonstrates to the person that their responses make sense based on their past learning, or based on a more holistic view of how their mind and body are connected (“Of course dealing with chronic knee pain really creates a lot of fatigue, and it makes it all the more understandable that you'd feel like giving up”). Feelings are valid even if based in dysfunctional associations (“I can see how you are frightened to go to work since your boss has a haircut just like your ex-husband”). Remember, you are not judging the feelings, you are demonstrating that you understand how those feelings make sense given the person's circumstances.

Level Five: Normalizing

Here you are communicating that what the other person feels is human and normal. “Anyone in the same situation would probably feel the same way.” “We all have those moments.” Or, my personal favorite: “Welcome to the human race.” On the other hand, don't validate behavior that isn't normal – this is “validating the invalid,” and creates mistrust. You want to look for the “grain of truth” in the person's response and help them understand that you understand that if they could have done anything to be more effective, they would have. Believe in good intentions while seeing struggles and pain.

Level Six: Radical Genuineness

Respond genuinely to the person about their impact on you. Treat the person as equal in status and respect. Don't be patronizing or condescending and don't treat the person as if they are too fragile to handle reality. Recognize strengths and limitations in a matter-of-fact way. Be willing to admit the truth of your feelings in a way that shows respect for the other person and yourself.