A time to talk: 5 simple steps for overcoming resistance and difficult behaviour

By Byron Lee for the COVID-19 South East Health and Wellbeing workstream

During these unprecedented times many people will be feeling the pressure. And people with be dealing with pressure in many different ways. Some will be coping by keeping busy, heads down and getting on with the job. Others will be needing time to talk and express how they are feeling. Others may be more inward focused, needing time to be reflective and contemplate. There will be many other ways of coping too.

Some of those ways of coping will potentially be problematic. For example feeling in control and having a sense of autonomy plays an important part in both giving us a sense of purpose and increasing our wellbeing. It helps us cope. Under normal circumstances a sense of autonomy helps people take responsibility for their work and lives, it contributes to getting things done.

The flip-side of this is when someone who needs to be in the driving seat feels out of control they may be uncooperative, resistant to change or even obstructive. In these situations the temptation is to push harder or even bypass the ‘problematic’ person. Such strategies tend to simply avoid the situation, hoping it will go away or become someone else’s problem.

There is an alternative: a simple 5 step approach to resistant and difficult behaviour that has the potential of making life easier for all involved. Paradoxically it’s also a process that enables us to feel in control too.

**Step 1 – Calm yourself**. When we are faced with difficult behaviour it is only natural that we might feel frustrated, anxious or a host of other unpleasant feelings. Simply acknowledge that’s how you are feeling. Pause, take a breath or two. If necessary go for a walk. Try not to escalate the situation which is unlikely to help. It’s more likely to amplify the difficult behaviour.

**Step 2 – Let go of your storyline.** Humans need meaning. When someone behaves ‘badly’ we will immediately begin the process of trying to make sense of what is happening. Yet our meaning-making or story telling processes are more often biased than not. People are quickly assigned roles as ‘goodies’, ‘baddies’ and ’victims’. We rarely if ever know the whole situation. When we want to engage with the person, we need to first recognise our storyline and then let it go.

**Step 3 – Understand their needs.** The next step is key and can take a little time. Once we have calmed ourselves and let go of the story line, the mere act of being interested in what is going on for them makes a difference. In many cases the whole situation feels calmer and they feel heard. By simply being empathetic and seeking to surface the unmet needs of the person we are one step closer to finding a mutually agreeable way forward.

**Step 4 – Be co-creative.** When we are faced with uncertainty we can respond in a number of different ways. When we feel threatened or anxious, we have limited access to resources and support we can find ourselves withdrawing or feeling unable to do anything. Conversely when we feel happy, supported and resourced we can be more open, adaptable and creative. In this stage of the process we begin to explore different ways to address unmet needs. Where someone has a need for autonomy, we can find aspects of their work where they have more control. When they need to be heard, we explore ways that need can be met. Now we can transform what was originally seen as problematic behaviour into something of real value. The renowned Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says ‘without mud there would be no lotus flowers’.

**Step 5 – Keep talking.** This is only the beginning. New situations will emerge and problematic behaviours will reappear. With the right tools and a place to process them you have the makings of a mutually nourishing relationship where unhelpful storylines are interrupted, unmet needs are understood, and creative action is taken for the benefit of everyone.