THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Office of Respectful Environments, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion
Faculty of Medicine

The ABCs of Compassionate Support

1 You do not need the full picture to be supportive.

The iceberg analogy[1] (below) reminds us to avoid making assumptions; prioritize being there for the person, not getting details of their backstory.

On the surface

Signs of distress we may observe

- Gruff or impatient language
- Storming out
- Disengagement
- Tearing up
- Distractedness
- Long pauses
- Shutting down
- [Others, including signs we miss]

Beneath the surface

Examples of the broader context for the person

- Power structures
- Social context
- News/global events
- Workplace interactions
- Handling conflict
- Physical & mental state
- Home/family
- Past trauma(s)
- Overwhelm
- [Other factors]

2 Judgment is not support. Focus on curiosity.

Dr. Marc Brackett[2], founder of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, advises we become "emotional scientists" rather than "emotional judges."

Judge

- **Dismissive:** Believes there is a "right" and "wrong" way to feel.
- **Limited:** Assumes they understand or jumps to conclusions based on scant information.
- **Prescriptive:** Projects their own beliefs about how things should be.

"What was that outburst all about?"
"Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed or something?"

Scientist

- **Curious:** Asks questions to understand their own and others' feelings.
- **Exploratory**: Open to learning through a process of trial and error.
- **Compassionate**: Listens to understand a person's experience and stands ready to support them.

"How are you?"
"Is there something on your mind?"
"Would you like to talk about anything?"

3 Use these ABCs to nourish basic psychological needs.

These are based on Self-Determination Theory[3], which proposes that a person's sense of wellbeing depends on the degree to which these three needs are met.

Restore **Agency**

Give them decision-making power over what they want to do next and why.

Clarify challenges:*

- "What I am hearing is that X is important to you."
- "How would you like to proceed?"
- "Is it accurate to say X seems like a major obstacle?"

Encourage reflection:

- "In your mind, does the plan you outlined support X value that you said was important earlier?"
- "Is there an issue here that you feel most prepared to address in the short term vs. the long term?"

Foster **Belonging**

Help them feel seen and valued by validating their experiences and feelings.

Listen with compassion:

- "I hear how difficult this is for you, and I'm here to support you."
- "Yes, that is challenging. Let's think together about what might help lighten the load."
- "It matters to me that you shared it. How can I be supportive as you work through this?"

Paraphrase:

- "I want to make sure that I am fully understanding... are you saying _____?"
- "Here is what I heard _____ ...is that right?"

Increase **Competence**

Help them see there are options, resources and tools available to them.

Offer structure & resources:

- "Is there information or knowledge that would be helpful to have?"
- "I know someone who had a similar struggle, and they talked to the Ombudsperson. Would you be interested in talking to her?"

Scaffold:

- "Is there one step that we can take in this moment?"
- "Do you think we could break this down into smaller steps together?"

Give positive feedback:

- "You have already done X, which is a positive move."
- "As I listen, I'm noticing that you've come a long way in your thinking from where you were earlier."

*Examples provided are non-exhaustive. Contact the REDI Office for more information about learning opportunities to apply and practice these skills in your program or unit.

4 Know about the UBC resources that are available.

A conversation can uncover a need for additional health and wellbeing resources, either for the person you are supporting or yourself.

Support for Students

- MD Students
- Postgraduate Medical Residents
- Graduate Students & Postdoctoral Trainees
- All Students in Vancouver and Distributed Sites
- All Students in the Okanagan
- Additional Supports

Support for Faculty & Staff

- UBC Employee and Family Assistance Program
- UBC extended health benefits
- UBC mental health supports
- Immediate, 24/7 mental health support: Call GreenShield Health at 1-866-424-0770 to chat with a counsellor.
- Helping a colleague in distress (Orange Folder)

Visit the UBC HR Health & Wellbeing website for a full list of resources and supports.

Why do we have this document?

This document was developed in response to a request from members of the Faculty of Medicine EDI Joint Interest Group (EDI-JIG) for resources to help model and apply trauma-informed practices in their respective programs.

Works Cited

1. Tardif M. Personal communication. 2025. Adapted from: Green JM. Deep Democracy. Rowman & Littlefield; 1999.

2. The Psychology Podcast. Become an Emotion Scientist with Marc Brackett [VIDEO] || The Psychology Podcast [Internet]. YouTube. 2019 [cited 2025 Nov 27]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVIS7llRY4M

3. Ryan RM, Deci EL. Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic motivation, Social development, and well-being. American Psychologist [Internet]. 2000 Jan;55(1):68–78. Available from: https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf

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