



# How to Coach People through Stress: Use Reflective Inquiry for Best Results

To lead people in stressful times, become their coaching partner.

*By Marcia Reynolds*

**T**he best thing you can do for people under stress is to help them share their feelings. Giving advice does little to decrease fear.

People need to feel seen, heard, and reminded that their existence matters. This acceptance may help them feel safe enough to enter a conversation with you about perspective and possibilities.

Don't just ask, "How are you?" Show some real concern and ask something like, "How are you really doing with all these challenges?" Relax as they talk; you don't need to make them feel better. Just say you understand and appreciate why they're thinking and feeling the way they do. Once their brains calm down, you can ask if they're ready to look at actions they can take.

## Focus on What's Most Real

Albert Einstein said, "Reality is an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." The less we know for sure, the more we believe the worst will happen. Emotions fool the brain. It's difficult to sort the most likely truths from imagination. But if you explore people's feelings without pressuring them, you can create a sense that the present moment is manageable.

A common mistake is to ask a lot of open-ended questions. Because our brains resist self-exploration, people reach insights better if you use reflective inquiry. Questions only seek answers. But reflecting on what people say, then mirroring your understanding back to them, leads to insight and trust.

When I coach clients, I listen for their beliefs about the present and assumptions about the future. Beliefs and assumptions calcify their stories. Pulling these notions out of the stories can soften the edges.

When I summarize the story I hear them tell, I share statements like, "Sounds like you believe (this) is happening." Or "You said you assume (this) is how the future will look. Can we sort out what else is possible?" I fill in (this) with specific phrases they shared, using their words so we can examine their thinking together.

Reflecting what people are saying helps them become objective observers of their stories. Once they see the limits of their stories, they can see other possibilities beyond the frame. This gives them a sense of control in the moment and some predictability about tomorrow.

## End with Straight Talk & Suggestions

Once you explore people's beliefs and assumptions, you might have facts to share that will bring structure to their thinking. Honest communication about present conditions actually relieves stress instead of creating more. When we speak the truth in a humane and caring way, people more easily face "what is" instead of being stuck in "what-ifs."

You don't need to be a trained coach to revive a brain attacked by stress. If you let people think through their problems while you stay compassionate and curious, they'll find value in the conversation.

Unexpected shifts are always around the corner. We must seek to help each other see beyond the boundaries of the stories we're living by, especially when stress attacks us. 

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## Mending People's Minds

Use coaching tools to help people deal with their emotions and find productive solutions, using articles such as these from NonprofitWorld.org:

**How to Reduce Employee Stress** (Vol. 24, No. 3)

**Embrace Mindfulness as a Leadership Practice** (Vol. 36, No. 2)

**The Overwhelmed Office: Six Fixes for the Stressed-Out, Productivity-Challenged Workplace** (Vol. 28, No. 4)

**Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence** (Vol. 27, No. 1)

**Counteract Stress to Make the Best Decisions** (Vol. 28, No. 1)

**How to Improve the Process of Change** (Vol. 28, No. 6)

**Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener** (Vol. 37, No. 1)

**A Three-Step Approach to Managing Workplace Stress** (Vol. 22, No. 1)

**A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, and Less Burnout?** (Vol. 36, No. 1)

**Push the Clear Button to Eliminate Stress** (Vol. 30, No. 5)

**Use Coaching to Retain the Leader's Edge** (Vol. 28, No. 2)

**Easing Stress in the Workplace** (Vol. 25, No. 4)

