“Emotional Labor is the mental work used to recognize and minimize emotions so they don’t rule the conversation.”

When you feel like saying “Hey Buster, this is how it is,” take a step back and use the protocol below instead.

**Be prepared**
- Expect emotions (your own and theirs) to come your way.
- Have a plan for how you will do it (especially if you have to give bad news).
- Monitor what you think and feel (awareness of your communication can make you more effective).
- Practice self regulation – Keep your own emotions in check when your buttons are pushed.
- Aim to turn the confrontation into a conversation.
- Know when NOT to have conversation (when emotions are too intense).

**Use non-judgmental listening**
- Remember it’s not about you, but about the other’s disappointments, fears, anxiety, etc. which often underlie the anger, blame or denial on the surface.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Listen without interrupting only making clarifying statements and paraphrasing.
  - “So let me see if I understand…”
  - “What I hear you saying is…”
- Put your own agenda aside until the other person is finished.
- Avoid trying to make a situation better when it is grave.
  - “I’m sure things will not be as bad as you think.”

**Six second rule**
- “Tell me more” statements
- Empathize and validate
- Respond with a wish statement

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Challenging Emotional Conversations with Patients & Families
A guide to forming a therapeutic alliance with patients and families

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MD Anderson
I'CARE
Interpersonal Communication and Relationship Enhancement
Empathizing and Validating to acknowledge and diminish emotions.

Acknowledge emotions by empathizing:
“I can see you weren’t expecting this.”
“This isn’t easy to talk about, is it?”
“It’s very stressful, isn’t it?”
“It must be hard to come here every week.”
“I can see how difficult it is for you.”

Respond with a Wish Statement
Let the other person know you hear them and acknowledge that the goal may be desirable, but…
“I wish I had better news…”
“I wish I didn’t have to tell you this…”
“I wish we had a more effective treatment.”
“I wish things had worked out better.”

Important Tips
- Stay calm.
- Avoid phrases such as:
  “I know how you feel.”
  “I feel your pain.”
  “It’s going to be alright.”
- When emotions/behaviors escalate and you feel threatened/unsafe, end the interaction.
  “This conversation is making me feel uncomfortable right now.”
  “I don’t feel safe right now and can’t continue this conversation.”

Six Second Rule
Avoid escalation of conversation.
- When your own emotions start to boil (especially in response to anger or blame), wait at least 6 seconds or more if needed for them to calm down.
- Avoid being defensive/blaming
  “Well it didn’t work because you waited too long to get help.”
- Gather your thoughts and use skills such as “tell me more” or empathic/validating responses.

Tell Me More
Invite the person to expand on what they are saying.
“Tell me more about your husband.”
“What happened after that?”
“What other concerns do you have?”

Resources
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For video demonstrations of these techniques, please visit our Web site at:
www.mdanderson.org/icare
Free online CME available