

Allies in Recovery: Forming a Connection with Your Loved One

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

Families are typically the first line of recognition and care for a loved one struggling with serious mental illness or substance abuse. They are called upon to be the person's case manager, vocational counselor, therapist, and housing specialist—all with little access to training and support.

Allies in Recovery (www.alliesinrecovery.net) offers family members strategies for effective communication and connection with a struggling loved one. The speaker at NAMI East Bay's March 22 meeting was **Kayla Solomon, LICSW**, a facilitator with the group and co-host of the podcast [Coming Up for Air](#). She is a clinician in private practice who has worked for many years at the intersection of mental illness and substance abuse disorder.

"My daughter corrects me constantly," Solomon began. "I make mistakes all the time, and I correct those mistakes. Perfection is not the goal. The goal is to be aware and connected and to know yourself. Expectation of perfection is dangerous—because then you have to do a complete reversal. And first you have to grieve for the expectation. If you are judging yourself, you cannot do this. ... I am in recovery from having to be right all the time."

Allies in Recovery is an online service that teaches skills in connection and awareness as well as self-care for those who are dealing with a struggling loved one. In this case, self-care does not mean yoga and meditation but learning the tools to calm your system down, which is not always easy. In the model that Solomon teaches, there is no such thing as doing it wrong. "You try and you fail," she said. "Of course you will fail, because no one is an expert in this. But when you fail, you have to sit back, pause, and ask, 'Where did I go off the rails?' You evaluate what went wrong."

From her early training as a marital relationship therapist, Solomon learned and used a technique called "intentional dialogue," which means communicating with complete consciousness. The framework comes from [Imago Relationship Therapy](#), which includes mirroring, validation, and empathy.

"You begin by repeating back what the other person is saying," she said. But you do this without making additions, editorializing, giving your own explanations, or offering personal reactions. To add your reactions would be like making a funhouse mirror, which distorts the image. Think of the Imago process as offering a flat mirror, which gives a true reflection. For example, if your loved one says he or she is hearing voices, you would say, "You're hearing voices. Tell me more about that."

"What we all require," she said, "is being seen and being heard. And there is safety in making this connection. You take the threat out of the discussion by taking your own reactivity down to zero."

Mirroring keeps the other person talking. But if they are going on a rant, you can gently interrupt. "Hold on, I don't think I quite understand. I want to make sure I'm

getting this.” And then you repeat back what you’re hearing. If the person makes corrections, then that is essential information. Their hearing themselves through mirroring helps them become more focused, and it de-escalates the situation.

“If you feel yourself being triggered,” Solomon said, “you have to put on mental blinders. Just hear what they are saying and put all other thoughts out of your head. Think, ‘This is not about me but about the person I’m listening to.’ Regulating your own system helps the other person calm down.”

When the person stops talking, it is then your turn to summarize everything they have said to you—the whole story. This is easy if you have been mirroring right along. “There is some kernel of truth in there if you allow them to come to the end of the story,” Solomon said. Listening on this level is something you can practice. And when you focus on doing the dialogue, the solutions will come to you. The more information you have helps you know what to do next. “Just listening is the most powerful tool you have,” she said.

The last part of the process is validation. People naturally want to have their feelings and experiences validated. You say, for example, “That makes sense to me.” But you never say, “I understand,” because you don’t have their entire experience, don’t know what the other person is actually thinking. To say, “I understand,” is a form of dismissal. Also, you don’t then go on to tell your side of the story or explain what you are thinking. You just go off and think about what the person has said. And saying that the person’s experience “makes sense” is not to say it is necessarily rational or reflects the real world. You are accepting that it is based on their reality.

Reflective listening—or mirroring dialogue, summarization, and validation—does not always present a solution. But it allows you to move forward with the person because you have made a connection.

Q. In mirroring, is it all right to use synonyms for the words they use, trying to clarify what they are saying?

A. That depends on the person and their reaction. With some people that may work, but others may be annoyed. Sometimes, also, the person may object to your repeating their statements in a flat tone, as if you’re getting it wrong. In that case, you might have to match their tone as well as their words.

Q. What if the person’s conversation is goal-oriented? My son doesn’t just want to be heard. He gets angry and screams. He wants to get back in the house and then to take drugs in the house.

A. Sometimes you have to pre-empt reflective listening. You say, “I know what you want.” And don’t use the process if it will create an attack on you. Do what you need for you. And validation does not mean that you have to say yes.

Q. My son has an ongoing inner dialogue with me about which I know nothing. He’ll say, “We talked about this,” when we haven’t.

A. You can say, “Oh, you did tell me about this. Can you tell me again?” If you say, “You *didn’t* tell me,” that ends it. The pattern should be, “yes, and ...”

Q. What if the dialogue is about horrendous accusations against me?

A. You mirror it back. Of course it’s upsetting, but this process is based not on your human feeling but on what works. You want to hear the story, what he’s thinking, his reality. But you cannot take it personally. It’s his world view and reality. It’s not about you.

Still, you have to set boundaries. You put up an imaginary plexiglass shield: you can see and hear things, but they don't penetrate. You have to listen in a clinical sort of way.

You are listening to people who are dysregulated, and your safety matters. When you feel unsafe, you can't function at all. (And, of course, if there's the potential for violence, you do not engage.)

But first you have to be kind to yourself. You will be listening to things that are painful. So then you need to sit back, pause, and notice what you are doing well in the situation.