

# Web Chat Training Tool

## The Five Stage Approach

Every conversation with chatters has a beginning, middle, and end. Each stage is unique and serves a different purpose to help you move through the conversation.

**The 5 stages are:** (1) Build Rapport (2) Explore (3) Identify the Goal (4) Discover Next Steps and (5) End the Conversation.

### Stage 1: Build Rapport

Starting with our first message, we want to establish trust with the chatter. This stage helps us create a safe environment for them to connect with us. All conversations start with a greeting. Especially with chatters in crisis, we want to make this greeting warm. Consider this stage how we introduce ourselves and set the tone for the conversation.

### Stage 2: Explore

During the second stage, we give the chatter room to open up about their crisis by encouraging them to share the situation or feelings behind what led them to seek support. We also consider if they're at risk of harming themselves or others, or being harmed by someone else. Throughout all of this, we listen and validate with empathy and warmth.

### Stage 3: Identify the Goal

Stage three is our chance to ask what they hope comes next given everything they've been going through. Chatters often experience a loss of control in the midst of their crisis and they often want things to feel manageable again. We can assist them by helping to sort through each issue to identifying where to start or what might need to take priority.

### Stage 4: Discover Next Steps

After listening to their situation and asking questions to make sure you have a good, clear picture, you can offer information about possible options they can consider. I like to say, "Based on all of the things you shared with me, here are your options..." This might be referring

them to a Vera House service, such as advocacy, clinical, or shelter. This might be giving them information about Orders of Protection and how they could go about applying for one. This might be safety planning around their physical safety or emotional safety.

We want to keep in mind that the individual is the expert of their own life. They will know what will work and what will not work. Our job is to offer the information about options they might have and to let them choose what they want to do given that information. We should avoid saying things like, “I think you should...” Rather, we want to say something like, “Given your situation, you could...”

It will help them to have some kind of a plan for what they are going to do when the chat ends. After you present their options and they choose what they would like to do (ex: apply for an order of protection and connect with an advocate to help them through court), it is often helpful to recap the plan with them and what the next steps they need to do are or what they should expect. (ex: “Okay Jane, the advocacy referral has been submitted so you should hear from an advocate within 5 to 7 days. If you need to talk to someone before you hear from them, you can chat with us again or call our support line.”)

## Stage 5: End the Conversation

Stage five is how we wrap up the conversation with them. We want this to be a warm close. This might involve emotional support and validation around how courageous it was to reach out and a check in that they feel they got what they needed in the conversation. Also remind them that we are here for them on the chat or support line at any time they need us.

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## Good Contact Techniques

Think about the last meaningful conversation you had. What made you feel comfortable sharing? What prompted you to feel safe and vulnerable?

In this section, we’ll take a look at the skills you can use to help chatters feel comfortable sharing and being vulnerable in a conversation. Providing a safe space for chatters is a priority. We do this by actively listening, being empathetic, having a warm tone, and using a combination of communication techniques.

### -Empathy

**Empathy** is the foundation of supporting others. In practice, empathy is being there with the chatter, attempting to step into their shoes without pretending that we understand exactly what it's like to walk in them. It's leaning into the conversation with the chatter and inviting them to open up more. We don't shy away from their difficult experiences; instead, we want to make them feel less alone.

## -Active Listening

To respond to chatters, we first need to understand them and their crisis. Active listening is truly understanding what another person is expressing. Often people listen in order to figure out when they can speak next.

Active listening via chat requires **carefully reading what chatters are sharing before thinking about how to respond**. It also requires making our response about them and not us. Every chatter's crisis is different.

In person, we use nonverbal cues to let others know we're engaged in what they're saying. For example, eye contact and head nodding are common ways we show others we're paying attention. Since we can't physically show chatters we're listening, we have to express that we understand solely with our words.

## -Warm Tone

Imagine receiving a one-word text response from a friend after a long message. Sometimes we interpret short messages as cold and wonder if our friend doesn't care. We're trying to decipher the tone of their message. Tone expresses your attitude toward what you're talking about. Or put simply, it's how you sound to someone else. **Without realizing it, we can sometimes sound cold, harsh or even judgmental**. Being intentional about our tone ensures that chatters can feel that we care about them.

While tone can be expressed through pitch in verbal conversations, expressing tone through text can seem more subtle. In fact, a message can have the same meaning, but completely different tones. For example, a message that says "Why would you do that?" can sound judgmental in comparison to a message that says "What do you think made you try it that way?" Although both questions are asking for the same information, one comes across as warmer than the other.

**Our goal is to always use a warm tone with chatters**. This prevents our messages from seeming harsh. Not only do our words need to be supportive, we need to make the chatter feel **understood** and **heard**. Reading a message out loud is a good way to judge how it sounds. If it feels choppy or robotic, your tone might not be warm.

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## Using Good Contact Techniques

We use Good Contact Techniques throughout the entirety of our conversations. Good contact techniques help us build a strong connection with the chatter. A good connection is the most important part of helping make the chatter feel safe enough to share their situation with us and possibly for us to help deescalate them.

We have six Good Contact Techniques. They are:

- Reflections
- Tentafiers
- Validations
- Strength IDs
- Open-ended questions

It can be difficult to think of what to say to someone in crisis, let alone someone we don't know, can't see, and can't hear. We can't offer any physical, visual, or audio affirmation that we're listening and we're here for them, so our messages need to be as warm and empathetic as possible.

**Good contact techniques give us a starting point to create warm messages to support and empower our chatters.** We use them throughout the conversation to let the chatter know we believe what they're telling us, their experiences are worth sharing, and these techniques in itself normalizes their feelings and strengthens our connection.

## -Reflections

### Why Reflections Works

Reflections show chatters you're listening closely and doing your best to understand their specific crisis. Without reflection, it's hard for chatters to know if they're communicating what they want you to know.

### How to use Reflections

Reflection requires paraphrasing what the chatter has shared. A common mistake when using this technique is repeating what the chatter says word for word. This can come off as robotic and doesn't show that we understand what the chatter is going through. Instead, take some time to read what the chatter has shared then summarize their thoughts in your own words.

### When to use Reflections

Reflection is primarily used to double-check that you're understanding the chatter correctly or to summarize large chunks of information.

## Example

**Chatter:** I'm so alone and the fight with my boyfriend is just really pissing me off and now I can't even talk to him about what I'm going through.

**Volunteer:** So you already felt isolated, and today's fight just added fuel to the fire?

In this example, the volunteer reflects how the chatter is feeling (alone) and why they're feeling that way (the fight with their boyfriend).

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## Tentafiers

### Why Tentafiers Work

Tentafiers help us to avoid making assumptions. You can also use them to encourage the chatter to share more about a particular feeling without asking a question. For instance, "It *sounds* like you are feeling worried about how your partner will react."

### How to Use Tentafiers

Tentafiers should be used to get clarity on how the chatter is feeling. By making our statements tentative, we leave the chatter's in control. We're not telling them how they're feeling, but instead leaving them in charge to confirm or deny and expand in their following message.

### When to Use Tentafiers

This technique is best used for more complex and subtle subjects, and also when you're unsure of what the chatter is saying or feeling. Avoid using this technique in cases where the meaning of the chatter is clear.

## Example

**Chatter:** My bff attempted suicide 3 months ago and things have been really touchy ever since. I don't know what to say to her and am afraid I'll make things worse, so I haven't really visited.

**Volunteer:** I get the feeling that you're worried that she's too fragile to talk after what happened.

**Takeaway:** The tentafier “I get the feeling that” gives the chatter space to correct us if they aren’t actually worried while helping us to understand how their situation is impacting them emotionally.

## List of Tentafiers

Below is a list of tentafiers that can help you express what you **think** a chatter is feeling, thinking, or doing while still giving them room to correct you.

- It seems like...
- I’m hearing that...
- I wonder if you’re feeling...
- If I understand right, you...
- I’m curious if...
- You seem to be feeling...
- I get the feeling that you...
- I’m getting the impression....
- It sounds like...
- So, you’re feeling...
- I hear you saying that...

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## Validations

### Why Validation Works

Validations are a way to accept a chatter’s emotions and crisis without judgement. They give the chatter space and permission to feel the way that they feel. Validations let you thoughtfully show the chatter that you hear and support them.

### When to Use Validations

This technique is best used when a chatter has just described a difficult emotion or challenging experience. It lets the chatter know that their feelings or experiences are normal and natural, and that there’s nothing wrong with them for feeling that way. For example, if a chatter shared that they just lost their job and are feeling devastated, we’d validate that it’s normal to feel distraught after a loss.

Validations, are helpful when chatters try to minimize their feelings. For instance, if a chatter said, “It’s stupid for me to feel upset about losing a job,” we can validate that it makes sense to feel upset in that situation.

### Example

**Chatter:** It’s stupid for me to feel this way, they ignore what I want all the time

**Volunteer:** **It’s normal to** be frustrated with your partner when they don’t listen to you.

**Takeaway:** Using a validation acknowledges that it’s understanding for the chatter to feel the way they do without agreeing that the chatter is stupid.

### Example

**Volunteer:** It’s normal to be frustrated when you don’t feel heard by your parents

**Volunteer:** From what you’re saying, **it’s understandable** you don’t feel comfortable opening up to your parents.

**Volunteer:** From what you’ve been saying about the fight, it makes sense that you’re feeling overwhelmed and upset.

### List of Validations

Below is a list of phrases to help validate how chatters are feeling about their crises.

- It’s normal to...
- It makes sense why you’re feeling...
- You’re going through a lot...
- Going through \_\_\_\_ can be intense...
- It’s understandable to feel...
- It can be awful to...
- That’s a difficult situation
- That’s a lot for one person to handle...
- There’s no wonder that...

# Strength IDs

## Why Strength IDs Work

Strength IDs point out the positives in a chatter's actions. People in crisis often focus on negatives, so it's useful to remind them of the positive things they're doing. For instance, "It takes courage to reach out for support." Strength IDs like this can guide chatters toward being more receptive to help, while reflecting their inherent strengths back to them. This can also alleviate feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

## How to Use Strength IDs

Strength IDs should be used to connect a positive trait to an action the chatter has taken. For instance, if a chatter said "It was stupid to text in" you wouldn't say, "You're not stupid, you're smart." Chatters who think they are stupid will not believe you. You could instead say, "I see someone who reached out for help and that shows how smart and insightful you really are."

## When to Use Strength IDs

This technique is most effective when a chatter shares details about their experience, as a way to build trust, or to empower the chatter to work toward next steps. You can truly use a strength ID at any stage of the conversation. Even so, it's not effective to praise a chatter with a Strength ID that you can't tie to a visible action.

For instance, saying "you are a good friend" wouldn't be appropriate if the chatter hasn't mentioned anything that makes them seem supportive to their friends. We don't want these words to feel empty. Always tie the strength ID back to something the chatter has shared or done.

## Example

**Chatter:** I'm terrified right now. My uncle was diagnosed with cancer and it's not looking good. I heard they don't have enough money for the hospital bills and I wish I could help but I'm in school. I suck.

**Volunteer:** I'm honestly impressed with your strength. You care greatly about your uncle and are carrying the weight of his pain. You seem like a thoughtful person.

**Takeaway:** This strength ID relates directly to the chatter's issue and it points out good qualities that are backed up by the chatter's own experiences and feelings.

## List of Strength IDs

Below is a list of strength IDs paired with an action that's observable from a conversation. Remember, the key to a good strength ID is to combine it with a real action the chatter shared or has done.

- The fact that you care so much about.... says a lot about your character.
  - I can tell that you're putting a lot of effort...into XYZ.
  - It takes real courage....to reach out for help when you're feeling \_\_\_\_\_.
  - It takes real strength... to make your wellbeing a priority.
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## Open-Ended Questions

### Why Open-Ended Questions Work

As we create a safe and open space, chatters tell their stories. Open-ended questions show chatters you're interested in understanding what they're going through. We avoid close-ended questions unless we need just a 'yes' or 'no' response since they limit how much a chatter could share.

### How to Use Open-Ended Questions

The most effective open-ended questions start with 'how,' 'when,' 'what,' and 'who'. Use open ended questions together with other Good Contact Techniques. Since "why" questions can sound judgmental and accusatory over text, we avoid them. For example, "Why are you failing classes?" can sound accusatory, and "Why did you cheat on your husband?" can sound like criticizing.

### When to Use Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions can be used throughout the conversation. They are most useful when you need to better understand a chatter's feelings and thoughts. Have a look at the three different responses to the same text below: the first example uses an open-ended question, leaving room for the chatter to open up more. However, the other two can come off as judgmental (why questions) or leading (close ended questions). See the difference below and stick to open-ended questions whenever possible.

### Example

**Chatter:** My mother is the bane of my existence. I just can't take it anymore.

**Volunteer:** It sounds like your mother is really upsetting you. What has she done that makes you feel frustrated?

**Takeaway:** Asking for more information allows the chatter to expand upon their feelings, and the empathetic statement gives more depth to the message.

## Example

**Chatter:** My mother is the bane of my existence. I just can't take it anymore.

**Volunteer:** It sounds like your mother is really upsetting you. Why does she make you so upset?

**Wish:** "Why" questions, like this one, can sound accusatory to the chatter, as if their crisis is their fault. Asking a different way lets them explain without feeling guilty for what's happening in the moment.

### \*\*\*\*\* Asking Multiple Questions in a Row

If we ask chatters a lot of questions in a row, it might make them feel like they're being interviewed or interrogated. We recommend not asking more than two questions in a row, unless you're getting specific information from a chatter. Avoid the trap of asking a question in every single message.

## List of Open-Ended Questions

Below is a list of open-ended questions to help you dig a little deeper with chatters.

- What have you tried to deal with...?
- What do you usually do when...?
- Have you thought about...?
- How did doing \_\_\_\_ make you feel?
- How long have you been feeling\_\_\_\_?
- How has \_\_\_\_\_ been affecting you?

## List of Other Questions

It's not always possible to use an open-ended question. Here are a few close-ended and clarifying questions that can also help chatter's open up.

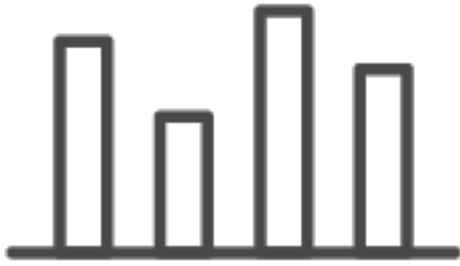
- Could you tell me...?
- Are you saying....?
- Would it be accurate to say...?
- I'm wondering if...?
- Do you have a specific example in mind?
- Would you be willing to...?
- Can you say more about...?
- Is that correct?

### Quick Access Phrase Bank

Strength IDs	Tentafiers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - <i>It's a brave thing to reach out for support</i></li> <li>• - <i>It sounds like you care a lot about...</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - <i>It sounds like you feel... because....</i></li> <li>• - <i>So, you're feeling....</i></li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - <i>The fact that you care so much about... says a lot about your character</i></li> <li>• - <i>You're clearly a strong person</i></li> <li>• - <i>I'm inspired by how you're dealing with such a difficult situation</i></li> <li>• - <i>I can tell that you're putting a lot of effort into this</i></li> <li>• - <i>I'm wondering if you know how courageous you are</i></li> <li>• - <i>I know it's hard to reach out for help, and I'm glad you did</i></li> <li>• - <i>You seem like an unique person with a lot to offer the world</i></li> <li>• - <i>The fact that you're trying is what matters</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - <i>I hear you're feeling....</i></li> <li>• - <i>You seem to be feeling....</i></li> <li>• - <i>My hunch is you're feeling....</i></li> <li>• - <i>I wonder if you're feeling....</i></li> <li>• - <i>I can't tell if you feel... or you feel....</i></li> <li>• - <i>I get the feeling that you...</i></li> <li>• - <i>I hear you saying that...</i></li> <li>• - <i>If I understand you right, you....</i></li> <li>• - <i>Let me see if I'm with you so far; you....</i></li> <li>• - <i>Is that what you are saying....</i></li> <li>• - <i>My impression is... does that fit....</i></li> <li>• - <i>Would it be accurate to say that you....</i></li> <li>• - <i>I'm sensing that you....</i></li> <li>• - <i>I get the impression that....</i></li> <li>• - <i>I'm thinking that you....</i></li> <li>• - <i>Sounds like there is a wish in there....</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Open-ended questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - <i>Could you tell me....?</i></li> <li>• - <i>I'm wondering if....?</i></li> <li>• - <i>Can you say more about....?</i></li> <li>• - <i>Have you thought about....?</i></li> <li>• - <i>Are you saying....?</i></li> <li>• - <i>What (How) is that for you....</i></li> <li>• - <i>I don't quite get what you mean, is it....</i></li> <li>• - <i>What does that mean to you....</i></li> <li>• - <i>How do you view that....</i></li> <li>• - <i>Can you expand on that idea....?</i></li> <li>• - <i>Do you have a specific example in mind?</i></li> <li>• - <i>When do you feel that way....</i></li> <li>• - <i>What sorts of things can you learn from that....</i></li> <li>• - <i>What was the last comment....</i></li> <li>• - <i>Would it be accurate to say....</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Validations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - <i>That's a difficult situation</i></li> <li>• - <i>It makes sense why you're feeling stressed...</i></li> <li>• - <i>It's understandable that...</i></li> <li>• - <i>It's normal to feel...</i></li> <li>• - <i>You're going through a lot</i></li> <li>• - <i>It can be overwhelming to...</i></li> <li>• - <i>That's a lot for one person to handle</i></li> <li>• - <i>It's not abnormal to feel that way...</i></li> <li>• - <i>Going through __ can be intense...</i></li> <li>• - <i>It can be rough to...</i></li> <li>• - <i>There's no wonder that...</i></li> <li>• - <i>It can often be confusing when...</i></li> </ul>

## Message Length



Data suggests that longer messages are associated with the most effective conversations. It's not surprising that chatters may judge how much we care by the length of our messages. Longer messages usually require us to be especially thoughtful about the words we choose. We want chatters to know we care. For that reason, we stay away from using too many short messages.

### Example

**Volunteer:** It sounds like you've been through a lot since your husband passed away. It makes sense that it's taking you time to sort out how you feel about him cheating when you never got to confront him about it.

The takeaway is to always be thoughtful in your responses to chatters by actively listening, responding empathetically, and using a warm tone.

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## Experiencing Abuse

Abuse comes in many forms including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Chatters don't always use the word "abuse" when describing their situation or crisis. Regardless of the type of abuse, we take chatter's concerns seriously and we believe the pain they're experiencing is real.

Some chatters are reaching out because they want to get away from their abuser while others are looking for ways to cope. In other cases, chatters aren't currently being abused, but experienced abuse at some time prior that's still impacting them. We listen and support all chatters regardless of when the abuse happened or what type of abuse it is.

## Intending to Die by Suicide

There are many feelings of shame, uneasiness, and confusion around suicide. We want to reduce the stigma about suicide whenever we can. For that reason, we encourage chatters to talk openly with us about their suicidal thoughts. This can be a difficult and uncomfortable conversation to have, but encouraging the chatter to talk about it and helping to assess their level of risk is important. (Note: if you end up on a chat where the person expresses feeling suicidal, you can contact the chat supervisor for support through that conversation. We don't get those kinds of disclosures often, but when we do, it's important to have support through them.)

### Four Determining Factors of Imminent Risk

1. Are they feeling suicidal?
2. Do they have a plan on how they might do it?
3. Do they have (or have access to) the means to fulfill the plan?
4. Is the intended timeline within the next 48 hours?

### Ladder Up Risk Assessment

Step	Question	Example of how to phrase the question:
Thoughts	Are they feeling suicidal?	Sometimes when people go through a breakup, they may have thoughts of ending their life. I want to check in, have you had any of these thoughts?
Plan	Have they decided how they'd complete suicide?	It takes strength to open up about this. How do you plan to end your life?
Means	Do they have the tools to complete suicide?	I appreciate your honesty. What do you have access to for carrying out your plan?
Timeframe	Do they know when they'll carry out their plan?	It sounds like you've thought a lot about this. When are you planning on ending your life?

If you determine that you the chatter is at risk of completing suicide, you should offer to send them help (call 911). They may or may not agree to letting you do this. It can be difficult to respect someone's self-determination in a situation like this. Reaching out to discuss this with your supervisor is important.