

GUIDANCE FOR FAMILY MEMBERS: RESPONDING TO DELUSIONS

Delusions are fixed, false beliefs. Delusions sometimes take the shape of paranoia (e.g. “The FBI is chasing me.”) or mistaken identity (e.g. a child claiming that a parent is an “imposter.”) Delusions are not the same as hallucinations (such as hearing voices). Developing a good response to delusions is not easy. If you feel lost, helpless and frustrated, you are not alone. Here are a few guidelines that may help.

INEFFECTIVE RESPONSES:

Do not argue. Delusions remain fixed even when the person is presented with evidence to the contrary. Arguing is likely to create distrust and confusion.

Avoid reinforcement. Reinforcing or “playing along” with delusions can cause problems later on. Don’t pretend to share the experience if you do not.

Do not be dismissive. Being dismissive or ignoring the experience might make the person feel invalidated, unheard and/or distrustful.

EFFECTIVE RESPONSES:

Acknowledge the delusions in a respectful, genuine way.

Empathize with the experience. This does not mean agreeing or reinforcing. Empathy means trying to put yourself in the other person’s shoes and expressing that you are trying to understand the other person’s experience.

Explore the person’s feelings and coping methods by asking open-ended, non-judgmental questions.

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE to provide a frame of reference for these techniques.

Loved one: “I need to get out of here to protect myself and everyone else.”

1. ACKNOWLEDGE: “I understand that you want to get out. Can I ask why?”

Loved one: “The CIA is after me and if I don’t get away, they’re going to come here and I don’t know what could happen.”

2. EMPATHIZE: “I can understand why you would want to get out if you feel like the CIA is after you. I don’t know that feeling, but I imagine it would be really terrifying.”

3. EXPLORE: “Is that what it feels like for you— terrifying?”

If your loved one says no, do not push. Be genuinely curious about how things are for them and ask further open-ended questions:

“Have you felt like the CIA is after you before? What helped you feel safer in the past? What could we do now to make you feel safer now?”