

## Communication skills

### Knowledge

An ability to draw on knowledge of the value of basic communication skills as a way:

of helping a person who self-harms or is suicidal feel supported by someone who is focused on their concerns and needs, and who helps them:

feel respected, heard and understood

feel connected to others (and so experience themselves as less isolated and alone)

express themselves and make sense of their experience

reflect on and request the support that they feel is appropriate to their immediate needs

for the listener to gain an accurate sense of a person's concerns and needs

An ability to draw on knowledge that where verbal communication is challenging for a person, other forms of communication (such as drawing, writing or play) are appropriate and may be the main way in which they communicate

an ability to make use of a range of communication strategies where this is indicated

An ability to draw on knowledge that asking about and talking about suicide or suicidal thoughts does not increase the likelihood of suicide attempts, and that it is helpful to communicate openly and frankly

### Application

An ability to deploy communication skills that help to engage a person who self-harms or is suicidal in a collaborative discussion of their circumstances and immediate needs

an ability to make adjustments for people who may have difficulty expressing themselves (e.g. because of a disability)

In order to gain an accurate sense of a person's account, an ability for the listener to be aware of (and to avoid) any 'filters' they may find themselves imposing, for example:

listening in a judgemental way

making assumptions (in advance, or instead, of listening fully)

using labels as explanations

An ability to convey an attentive stance through body language, for example:

sitting close (but not too close) to the person

sitting 'square on' or next to the person (rather than across a desk or table)

adopting an open posture

maintaining an appropriate level of eye contact

An ability to listen attentively to a person by:
actively listening to their verbal account and trying to make sense of their experiences, behaviours and feelings, and the social context in which these arise
listening to the tone and pace of what is said, as well as its content
allowing silences if this appears to help them express themselves at their own pace
attending to non-verbal behaviour such as agitation (as a guide to the areas which are more intensely distressing or as an indicator of 'unspoken' feelings that might be difficult to express verbally)
adopting a pace that 'matches' theirs
An ability to help a person expand on or explore relevant issues by using:
statements (e.g. brief summaries of what has already been said)
questions
non-verbal prompts
An ability to ask both:
'closed' questions (that usually have a specific answer and which are best used to establish factual information)
'open' questions (that require more than a yes/no answer and which encourage discussion)
An ability to judge when questioning is being experienced as helpful and when it is less so (e.g. when a person is feeling 'grilled')
An ability to listen empathically to a person by:
actively trying to understand their perspective and the way they understand their situation
'stepping into their shoes' in order to understand their world
taking on board and recognising their feelings (but taking care not to mirror these feelings in oneself)
An ability to maintain an awareness of one's own perspective or frame of reference in order not to inadvertently impose it
An ability to convey a basic and empathic understanding of what has been said or conveyed, for example by:
paraphrasing what has been said (but not repeating verbatim)
making short summaries that try to connect various aspects of what has been conveyed
using appropriate non-verbal behaviour that 'chimes' with what has been said (e.g. through appropriate facial expressions)
An ability to check a person's understanding by asking them to summarise the discussion and any decisions that have been agreed
An ability to ask a person whether all the issues that they wished to raise have been discussed

## **Ability to communicate with children and young people of differing ages and developmental levels**

An ability to draw on knowledge of the ways in which developmental differences usually manifest themselves, in relation to children's and young people's:

language

thinking and understanding

expression of affect

behaviour

## **Knowledge of the impact of development on children's or young people's understanding and participation**

An ability to draw on knowledge that children and young people will have a more concrete and self-centred understanding of:

themselves

the ways that other people think and feel

interpersonal situations

An ability to draw on knowledge that children and young people may have difficulty putting their concerns and feelings into words, and an awareness that:

they may need support to share concerns and feelings

short replies (such as 'I don't know' and shrugs) are common when talking to children and young people

An ability to draw on knowledge that using leading, multiple and double questions can be confusing for children and young people (and result in potentially misleading answers)

## **Providing developmentally appropriate information about any meetings about a child or young person's care**

An ability to provide developmentally appropriate information about the meeting in order to reduce anxiety and increase trust in the practitioner, and to discuss:

the aim of the meeting

how the practitioner will manage confidentiality and its limits

how and what information will be shared with the family/carer and other agencies

### **Ability to engage with the perspectives of children and young people**

An ability to draw on knowledge that children and young people often need to have spent some time with a practitioner before feeling able to express themselves
an ability to show patience and persistence in helping a child or young person to express themselves
An ability to draw on knowledge of the language, attitudes, behaviours and interests of children and young people of comparable age
An ability to show interest in a child or young person as an individual
An ability to show 'neutrality' in relation to problematic behaviour
An ability to stay in tune with a child's or young person's language, emotional state and developmental capacities

### **Choosing developmentally appropriate activities to aid engagement**

An ability to draw on knowledge that some children and young people may find it difficult to engage with the practitioner in particular settings (e.g. a formal 1:1 interview room), so alternative settings or adjustments to the setting may need to be considered
An ability to engage children and young people by using technologies that they are familiar with (e.g. text messaging)

### **Ability to help children and young people express themselves verbally**

An ability to 'scaffold' conversation to help a child's or young person's understanding and communication by:
keeping ideas concrete
using simple words (and few of them)
breaking down questions into component parts
moving from less to more difficult questions
moving from less to more difficult topics
letting them express some positives first
giving them choices about what they speak about
An ability to use rating scales to help a child or young person communicate (e.g. rating their feelings using an analogue scale of 1 to 10)
An ability to encourage a child or young person by thinking aloud for them (e.g. 'I wonder if...')
An ability to normalise a child or young person's experience (e.g. 'Children/young people often think that...')
An ability to help a child or young person offer an opinion (e.g. 'Do you think that...?')
An ability to move back to easier topics if a child or young person becomes distressed or anxious
An ability to move between 'trivial' and relevant issues in order to moderate distress or anxiety

### **Engaging a child or young person when families or carers are present**

When children or young people and families or carers are seen together, an ability to set out the parameters of the meeting, in particular to ensure that the child or young person is aware that:
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all parties will be given an opportunity to talk and to have their point of view heard
the practitioner understands that they may have a different point of view from their family/carers, and that they are interested in hearing this

An ability to repeat and re-phrase important interview content for a child or young person
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## Ability to communicate with people with neurodevelopmental conditions

This section identifies communication issues that may arise in people with neurodevelopmental conditions (conditions that are a result of brain development). Three examples of these conditions are included, but it is important to hold in mind:

- that there are a range of such conditions
- that some people will have more than one neurodevelopmental condition
- that challenges to communication may be present in people who have some but not all of the characteristics of these conditions.

An ability to draw on knowledge that where verbal communication is challenging for a person, other forms of communication (such as drawing, writing or play) are appropriate and may be the main way in which they communicate

an ability to make use of a range of communication strategies where this is indicated

## Communicating with people with learning disabilities

An ability to draw on knowledge that the linguistic and cognitive abilities of people with learning disabilities will vary considerably from person to person, but that they may have specific communication difficulties, such as:

difficulty understanding abstract concepts

unclear speech

needing more time to process and retrieve information

limited vocabulary

prone to suggestibility (changing their answers in response to feedback)

they may be prone to acquiescence (they may tend to answer 'yes' to questions)

they may struggle to express themselves and become frustrated by this

An ability to draw on knowledge that people with learning disabilities may have acquired social strategies to help them 'mask' their difficulties understanding and following verbal communication

An ability to address any difficulties a person has communicating by making appropriate adjustments, such as:

listening carefully and asking the person to clarify or repeat information if it hard to understand what has been said

allowing time for them to respond

using simple, straightforward, everyday language

limiting the number of key concepts or ideas that are communicated in a sentence

using concrete examples (rather than abstract ideas)

asking short, simple either/or questions (but taking care to avoid leading questions)

creating a context for comments or questions (to help them understand the reasons for them)

regularly asking them to summarise or repeat what has been discussed (to check that they have understood accurately)

## Communicating with people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

An ability to draw on knowledge that people with ASD vary considerably in their capacity to communicate, but that they may:

- have difficulty articulating and communicating how they are feeling, both via speech and via non-verbal communication (e.g. facial expression, body language)
- have a very literal interpretation of language and so find figurative language (metaphors, idioms, similes) challenging to understand
- have a higher level of expressive language (their ability to use language to communicate with others) than receptive language (how much they understand when people are talking to them)
- find lengthy and complex communications difficult to follow
- find it difficult to modulate the pitch, tone or speed of their voice (e.g. talking in a monotone or more loudly than is socially appropriate)
- find it uncomfortable to maintain continuous eye contact
- have difficulty interpreting facial expressions
- have difficulty interpreting body language

An ability to adjust communication with people with ASD to accommodate their communication difficulties, for example by:

- keeping communications short and straightforward
- taking care not to use metaphors, idioms, similes or analogies
- using concrete examples and facts to explain things
- asking specific questions
- taking care not to overload them with verbal information
- allowing time for them to respond
- regularly asking them to summarise or repeat what has been discussed (to check that they have understood accurately)

## Communicating with people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

An ability to draw on knowledge that people with ADHD:

- have difficulty directing and sustaining attention
- can appear inattentive and forgetful
- often have difficulty with impulse control
- can experience social difficulties arising from the combination of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity

An ability to draw on knowledge that people with ADHD can find it difficult to:

- attend to the thread of a conversation
- concentrate on long conversations
- attend to conversations in a noisy environment

An ability to draw on knowledge that people with ADHD may:

- 'blurt out' answers
- interrupt
- talk excessively
- struggle to organise their thoughts
- be easily distracted
- feel overwhelmed

An ability to adjust communication to take account of the difficulties experienced by people with ADHD, for example:

minimising potential distractions (e.g. noisy or busy environments, mobile phones)

keeping communications short and focused

giving a 'big picture' summary before moving to a succinct account of details (and thereby accommodate difficulties holding attention)

avoiding long conversations



## Signposting

'Signposting' is a form of self-help in which people are given information about accessing services that are relevant to their needs. Taking steps to make it likely that people will actually access these services is an important part of this process.

An ability draw on knowledge that signposting aims to help a person access sources of support that are relevant to their circumstances and of which they may not be aware

An ability to draw on knowledge that signposting can be offered alongside other courses of action

An ability to judge when a person may need support to access services by identifying any potential barriers to uptake and helping them problem-solve and manage these obstacles

An ability to draw on knowledge of available sources of support in order to signpost vulnerable people to appropriate services, and to ensure that information about these sources of support:

is up to date

accurately characterises the level of support on offer

An ability to draw on knowledge of a range of sources of support, such as:

emergency departments

general practice clinics

local open access mental health services (such as IAPT)

local voluntary sector services offering both emotional and practical support (e.g. for issues such as debt and social isolation)

national websites and helplines (such as the Samaritans)

An ability to judge the type of service most relevant to a person's needs

An ability to identify services that are accessible to a person (e.g. taking into account disabilities that may make it difficult to travel or to make use of the service)

An ability to convey information about the service

An ability to pass on contact information in a form that makes it likely to be retained and used, for example:

written rather than verbal

using the medium most likely to be accessed by a person (e.g. electronically, via social media or an app, or 'paper and pencil')

An ability to judge the type of support that matches to a person's needs and situation (i.e. when access to self-help and/or non-professional services is suitable, and when signposting to statutory services is more appropriate), based on:

the nature and severity of their distress and current and past behaviour

their expressed preferences and willingness to access services