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 which helps them:
  - feel respected, heard and understood
  - feel connected to others (and so experience themselves as less isolated and alone)
  - express themselves and makes sense of their experience
  - reflect on and request the support that they feel is appropriate to their immediate needs
  - for the professional to gain an accurate sense of their 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 with frankness

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 a person 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 professional to be aware of (and 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 diagnostic labels as explanations

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

- sitting close (but not too close) to a person
- sitting ‘square on’ or next to a person (rather than across a desk)
- adopting an open posture
- maintaining an appropriate level of eye contact
An ability to listen attentively to a person, and their family or carers, 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 their non-verbal behaviour such as agitation (as a guide to areas that 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, and their family or carers, 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 that encourage discussion)

An ability to judge when questioning is being experienced as helpful or unhelpful (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, or their family’s or carers', 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