

**How to Have a Mental
Health Conversation**

Resource Pack

Developed by SAMH Physical Activity and Sport Team

Thank You!

Firstly, thank you so much for taking part in our How to Have a Mental Health Conversation session. Your time and participation is hugely appreciated. We hope you found the session valuable and are able to use your learning and skills developed in your professional and personal lives.

Session Outcomes

Identify and understand ways to help you have a mental health Conversation

Build knowledge of a potential structure for having a mental health conversation.

Develop an understanding of Roles and Responsibilities to manage expectations

Explore support for yourself and others, including effective self-care building and external support service available

Conversation Starters

Below are some examples you could use. Remember having a conversation shouldn't just be about the person's mental health. Talk about interests, things they enjoy, what they've been up to and build the connection with them and make you both feel more comfortable.

**DON'T WORRY IF YOU'RE NOT
SURE HOW TO BEGIN, WE'VE GOT
SOME SUGGESTIONS...**



Responses & Reactions

During the session we also discussed different responses and reactions you might see when you start to have a conversation about someone's mental health. When preparing to have a conversation about someone's mental health, think about different ways you might respond, what you might say and how to react to each of the responses.

RESPONSES & REACTIONS

no response IGNORING YOU OR NOT RESPONDING

denial "I'M FINE, EVERYTHING'S FINE"

defensive "I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN!"

getting emotional "YES ACTUALLY..." MIGHT HAVE A STRONG EMOTIONAL REACTION

opening up/sharing a lot "MAY DISCLOSE AN EXPERIENCE OR TRAUMA TO YOU"

No Response

- Build connections with the person. Talk about other topics to ease them into the conversation.
- You may need to have a few tries to open a conversation – don't panic!
- It might take more than one conversation for someone to open up to you this is ok.

“I'm Fine, Everything's Fine”

- This is one of the responses as to why it's so important you prepare for the conversation
- Reiterate why you are having the conversation, “I hear that you're saying everything's fine but I've noticed.... Are you sure there's nothing you want to talk about?”
- Just by starting a conversation it shows you care about the person, they may not be ready to talk then and there and that's ok but they may come back to you or someone else at another time, when they are ready if they feel comfortable.
- Don't be afraid to ask someone twice.
- It may take more than one attempt at starting a conversation with someone before they are ready to share, reassure them that you are there if they want to talk and that they can trust you.

Defensive Response “I don't know what you mean”

- Stay calm - Go back to why you are having the conversation, what have you noticed.
- Don't force them into talking but you may want to ask again
- If you get a similar response reassure them that you care about them and are there if there is anything they want to talk about – it may not be the right time so leaving the door open for conversation to take place at a later date may be the most beneficial. – Remember it may take more than one attempt to have the conversation!
- It's important to respect that someone might not always want to talk and not to push them if they aren't ready.

Getting Emotional

- Make sure you create a safe space for them to be open with you
- Listen to what the person is telling you – try not to react negatively or panic
- Be responsive to what they are sharing with you, paraphrase to check understanding and help them make sense of what they are feeling/sharing with you
- Reassure them that whatever they are feeling is completely natural
- Ask them what they feel would be helpful for them and how together you can take steps to make that happen

Opening Up & Sharing a lot

- Listen to what they are telling you
- Go back over key things they have shared to show you are listening and that you care about what they are saying and to check understanding.
- Ask what they would like or what they need to support them – are there things you can do together or do they need additional support from external sources
- Reassure them that how they are feeling is valid & important to you

Looking after yourself

- Remember you are not there to fix their problems
- You may be able to help support them in some ways but there are organisations who can support both you and them
- Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it

The most important part of having a Mental Health Conversation with someone is LISTENING, SHOWING YOU CARE & UNDERSTANDING

Remember empathy is key when talking to someone about their mental health. It's important that you don't invalidate or play down how they are feeling or what they are experiencing.

During the training we looked at Brene Brown's Empathy video. It is linked below for you to watch again and consider responses you might use when having a conversation with someone.



Active Listening

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During the session we introduced the “**SHUSH**” Acronym for Active Listening which is promoted and used in the Samaritans and NHS. More information is detailed below or you can find it on this [link](#).

Show you care:

- Focus on the other person, make eye contact, put away your phone.
- To really listen to somebody, you need to give them your full attention, maintain eye contact and be engaged.
- Getting into this habit takes practice so don't be too hard on yourself and keep using these handy tips:
- When starting the conversation resolve not to talk about yourself at all.
- Keep a listening diary – just for a week. Record how many times you listened really well, note what challenges and distracts you and what you think went well.
- Aim to learn at least one new thing about the person who is talking to you.

Have patience:

- It may take time and several attempts before a person is ready to open up.
- Effective listening is about creating trust with the other person. The person sharing shouldn't feel rushed, or they won't feel it's a safe environment.
- If they've paused in their response, wait, they may not have finished speaking. It might take them some time to formulate what they are saying, or they may find it difficult to articulate what they're feeling.
- Through non-judgemental listening, you are allowing the person to relax into the conversation and to use it as a place to reflect or work through difficult emotions.
- Try asking, 'how are you feeling today'? And don't be afraid to dig a little deeper when someone's words don't match how they are acting.
- 'Are you sure?' can be a powerful question.
- Everyone has at some point in their life said “I'm fine” “can't complain” “not bad” or “alright” when asked how they are, when in reality they were angry, sad, frustrated, anxious, or any combination of emotions other than “fine.”
- “I'm fine” rarely means “everything is perfectly adequate, and I have absolutely no complaints.” So that little extra “Are you sure?” can really go a long way in reassuring that person that you are actually there for them to talk to and you aren't just asking out of politeness. This isn't water-cooler chat. This is someone taking a genuine interest in the mental health state of someone they care about.
- A well placed “are you sure?” can be the sign someone needs that it is ok to be honest.

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Use open-ended questions:

- Use open questions that need more than a yes/no answer, and follow up with questions like 'Tell me more'.
- An open-ended question means not jumping in with your own ideas about how the other person may be feeling.
- These questions don't impose a viewpoint and require a person to pause, think and reflect, and then hopefully expand.
- Avoid asking questions or saying something that closes down the conversation. Open-ended questions encourage them to talk, the conversation is a safe space that you are holding for them and nothing they say is right or wrong.
- When – "When did you realise you felt this way?"
- Where – "Where do you go when you start to feel anxious?"
- What – "What else happened?"
- How – "How did that feel?"
- Why – be careful with this one as it can make someone defensive. "What made you choose that?" or "What were you thinking at the time?" is more effective.

Say it back:

- Check you've understood, but don't interrupt or offer a solution. In everyday life, it's easy to offer little bits of guidance and advice here and there without much thought. But with the really important or difficult decisions, telling someone what to do can be really unhelpful. The best support you can provide is helping them talk through the problems they are facing so that they can decide what's best for them.
- Repeating something back to somebody is a really good way to reassure them that they have your undivided attention. And you can check to see that you're hearing what they want you to hear, not putting your own interpretation onto the conversation.
- Try asking clarifying questions like:
 - When you say...do you mean...?
 - Tell me more about...?
 - What do you really mean by that?
 - It sounds like...is that how you feel?

Have courage:

- Don't be put off by a negative response and, most importantly, don't feel you have to fill a silence.
- Sometimes it can feel intrusive and counter-intuitive to ask someone how they feel. You'll soon be able to tell if someone is uncomfortable and doesn't want to engage with you at that level.
- You'll be surprised at how willing people are to listen and how, sometimes, it is exactly what somebody needs to be able to share what is going on their mind.

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- “Once a person pauses I count to three in my head. This gives them time to elaborate further if they need to. It also shows you are thinking about what they are saying which will hopefully give them the *confidence to keep talking*.” Samaritans volunteer



Samaritans wants to encourage people to listen to the really important things their friends, family and colleagues need to tell them, and to devote some time and attention to being better listeners.



Show you care

Focus on the other person, make eye contact, put away your phone.



Have patience

It may take time and several attempts before a person is ready to open up.



Use open questions

That need more than a yes/no answer, and follow up eg 'Tell me more'.



Say it back

To check you've understood, but don't interrupt or offer a solution.



Have courage

Don't be put off by a negative response and, most importantly, don't feel you have to fill a silence.

Debrief/Reflection Sheet

Having a conversation about mental health with someone can be emotional for you as well as them so it's important you take time to look after yourself.

You may already have processes in place to help you reflect or debrief but if not this template might help you.

We have included some space to reflect on the conversation, what went well, what you might change and space for you to think about yourself.

Remember to take time to do some self-care and debrief if you need to.

Debrief Sheet

What happened?

Who did I have the conversation with? Where and how
How am I feeling?

Main points from
conversation:

What went well, and what
could have been better?

What went well?:

What I could do differently next time:

Actions I will take:

Actions they will take:

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO TO LOOK AFTER MYSELF?

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Top Tips Card

Prepare

Think about the how, when, and where of your conversation.

Ask

Start by asking the person how they are? Use open ended questions e.g I have noticed you have been withdrawn lately, how are you really?

Listen

Your role is to listen; be an active listener, pay attention to body language, resist judgement, and respond appropriately.

Agree

Agree on what the next steps are going to be with the person and led by the individual.

Reassure

There is support for both of you, signpost to one of the helplines or websites in your resource pack.

SAMH Support & Signposting

Active2:Grow

A fun and safe program to learn about mental health, make friends and be active.
Ages 11-14 Glasgow, North Ayrshire, Fife & Stirling

The Changing Room

12-week program focusing on men's mental health and wellbeing through the beautiful game, of football.
Males ages 30-64
Running in Football Clubs Around Scotland

JogScotland

Jog and walking groups throughout Scotland for all ages and abilities.
All jog leaders are trained in Mental Health Awareness

SAMH Mental Health Charter for Physical Activity and Sport Sign up - <https://www.samh.org.uk/get-involved/physical-activity-and-sport/our-projects/mental-health-charter/sign-up-to-the-charter-community-level>

SAMH Website

Scottish Association for Mental Health website lots of good information and links resources and information about Mental Health & Wellbeing
Website: www.samh.org.uk

Wellbeing assessment tool

Keeping track of our mood over time can help us to recognise a deterioration in our mental health.
<https://www.samh.org.uk/about-mental-health/self-help-and-wellbeing/wellbeing-assessment-tool>

National Support & Signposting

Breathing Space
An NHS based service that offers a listening service.
Tel. 0800 83 85 87
(Monday to Thursday, 6pm to 2am & Friday to Monday, 6pm to 6am)
Website:
<https://breathingspace.scot/>

Beat Scotland
Eating Disorder support and resources.
Website:
<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>
Tel. 0808 801 0432

NHS 24
An NHS out of hours' triage service.
Tel. 111

SHOUT
A confidential, anonymous and free text helpline.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
Text SHOUT to 85258
Website:
<https://giveusashout.org/>

Samaritans
Crisis listening service
Tel. 116 123
24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
Email. jo@samaritans.org
Website:
<https://www.samaritans.org/?nation=scotland>

sportscotland
Various case studies detailing the benefits of physical activity and sport on people's mental health.
<https://sportfirst.sportscotland.org.uk/articles/?tag=mental+health>

Healthier Scotland
Things you can do to help clear your head
<https://clearyourhead.scot/>

MIND Website
Partner charity for England & Wales. Very good website with lots of information, resources and case studies about Mental Health and Wellbeing
[Website: www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)