



AGE BETTER  
IN SHEFFIELD

# Keep Calm and Listen

Effective ways of holding  
conversations with someone living  
with a mental health condition

## Introduction

The first contact with Age Better in Sheffield (ABiS) for many prospective participants is a phone call from a Delivery Partner following a referral from the Programme's administrative assistant. At this stage in the relationship little is known about the individual's history or present circumstances. The Delivery Partner must make the initial contact and decide whether to accept the referral onto their project. At this stage the caller may become aware that the person on the other end of the phone has a mental health condition or this could become apparent at the first face to face meeting. It is vital that this stage of the process is handled as professionally and sensitively as possible.



# ***Learning effective ways of handling conversations with people living with mental health conditions***

## **The challenge for Sheffield projects**

Many of the frontline staff working for Delivery Partners are not necessarily trained or experienced in handling conversations with people living with mental health conditions. Because there is little information regarding the individual being referred, that first conversation can quickly become awkward or even impossible, if the member of staff is caught off guard. So how can frontline staff be prepared to handle a conversation with a caller who presents with mental health issues?

ABiS is fortunate in having Sheffield Mind as one of its Programme Delivery Partners and Richard Brocklehurst, Clinical Lead Therapist at Sheffield Mind, designed and led a learning session for all delivery partners. This is a digest of the learning from that session.

## Situations are co-created

Situations and relationships can quickly develop in a negative way due to reactions which are unhelpful. Our instinct when confronted with a caller who seems to be upset, agitated or angry is to want to help and to try and fix them. Avoid this immediate desire to “rescue” the person and instead, **LISTEN.**

### **This is not easy, but it is essential.**

Don't start an unhelpful cycle of not listening. Even if it feels really awkward, do not jump in with advice. Let the person speak and stay in the moment. Do not start thinking ahead about how you are going to fix this situation.

#### **Top tips**

- Don't try to fix the person
- Listen
- Don't get carried away by your desire to help

## How to show empathy

The person at the other end of the phone is very aware of the stigma surrounding mental health conditions whether it's anxiety, depression or schizophrenia. Don't start a cycle of not listening and stigmatising. Don't label the issue but offer reassurance and reflect back their feelings:

**“I’m hearing that you are really upset”**

**“I’m hearing that you’re really frustrated”**

All thoughts are driven by feelings. The caller may talk about their thoughts, you need to listen and try to reflect back to them their feelings. By doing this you are showing empathy.

**Top tip**

- Don’t fall into the trap of asking: “What can I do?”

***“If you are coming from a place of good and well meaning, then it’s going to be ok.”***

**Richard Brocklehurst** Sheffield Mind

**Keep calm and offer reassurance**

Allow the person to talk and reassure them you are listening by using “para verbals” such as *“yep”, “ok”, “Uh huh” or “I hear you”*.

They need to feel acknowledged so ask their name and use it in the conversation. If the contact is face to face rather than by phone be sure to make eye contact as this is a basic psychological need for all humans and will help to make them feel grounded.

**Top tip**

- Talk to the person, not to their symptoms

## Understanding why we often react the way we do

To help us understand why we frequently react to situations in a particular way, Richard shared the Three Ego States theory and proposed some hypothetical situations to test how people reacted.

The theory says that each of us will react to a situation from one of three positions:

**Parent** “It’s my job to sort you out”

**Adult** Stays calm, is patient, listens and reflects

**Child** “I don’t know what to do” “I feel helpless”

The caller needs the person at the other end of the phone to react from the position of adult. They are looking for someone to come alongside them, to empower them rather than to rescue them.

***“There are no right or wrong answers;  
stay calm and sit with it”***

**Richard Brocklehurst** Sheffield Mind

## Further reading

- First Steps in Counselling (a student’s companion) Pete Sanders PCCS Books
- Next Steps in Counselling Frankland & Sanders PCCS Books
- For more theory and more on skills – Counselling Skills – John and Julia McLeod – Open University / Mc Graw Hill

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