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Emotional Support Guide

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This guide has been created to help improve emotional support for individuals in distress.

In 2014 there were 6,581 suicides in the UK and the Republic of Ireland (Scowcroft, 2016) and an unbelievably one in ten people in the UK self-harms (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2014). However, this is reducible, there is a need to raise awareness and provide appropriate support for someone in distress. This can be done by promoting a better understanding of distress and suicide and enabling individuals to work through problems and maintain autonomy.

The guide intends to help people offer emotional support by truly listening to an individual, accepting them and responding with empathy. This approach allows us to see the world through another's eyes and understand how distress affects their life.

It will provide guidance on how to approach someone, respond in an appropriate way and empowers people to offer alternatives to self-harm that can help someone reclaim control of their lives. The guide also emphasises the importance of self-care especially when helping others.


Before you start to support someone it helps to be aware of what is meant by emotional support, how it can work and address the questions that are often raised when thinking about difficult topics including self-harm and suicide.



What is meant by emotional health?

We all know what physical health is. It only changes if we have an accident or of course become unwell. Emotional health is different. It can change daily or even hourly. It can be hard to see if someone is struggling with their emotional health.

Everyone has times when they feel happy and well, at other times they can feel sad or down. Asking how someone is can give them the freedom to open up.



What could I do to support someone?

When someone is struggling with their emotional health there are things we can do to help including listening to that person, without judgement, giving someone time and a safe space to talk about how they are feeling and helping them work through their choices.

Offering emotional support helps us to learn what someone is feeling from what they are saying. Sometimes you don't need to talk about feelings directly. Some people realise their feelings by telling us the story of what has happened to them.

Why focus on their feelings?

To show you care it helps to focus on feeling rather than trying to find a solution to the problem. Sometimes thinking you have all the answers is less supportive. It is important to show consideration for how someone may be feeling.

Letting someone decide for themselves can be better than trying to fix their issues. People react to things in different ways, often what works for one may not work for another.

What prevents someone from talking?

People struggle to talk for many reasons. They might have been brought up not to express feelings. They may struggle to understand what they are feeling. They may speak a different language to you. They may feel fear or embarrassment about what's happening to them or they may simply not know where to start.

The attitudes displayed by health professionals can have a great affect on the experience of an individual. In fact strong negative attitudes held by some professionals can have a profoundly negative affect on the individual.

Listening requires you to commit yourself to a person. However, there are reasons why this may be difficult.

What
barriers should I be
aware of when trying
to support someone?

We often use our own experiences to explain a situation. However, everyone feels things differently this may cause a barrier to our listening. Remember the person you are listening to may feel differently to you.

Our own prejudices can affect the way we listen. If someone has a different point of view to ours or has done something we feel is wrong we may struggle to accept what they tell us. Being non-judgemental and accepting means listening to things you may find hard.

Being aware of our own feeling can help us support others. If we have had a hard day or something bad is happening at home, it can be hard to connect with the person we are trying to support. Having support yourself and knowing how to cope with your own feeling can help with this.


Not having time is a barrier to supporting someone. We are all busy and listening can be seen as unproductive. However, taking time to listen could make all the difference to that person.



But I find
distress daunting!

Caring for someone who is in distress is highly complex. It can be daunting and sometimes scary to approach someone to offer support. It helps to show we are willing to support them and this encourages a person to talk when they are ready.

Using a non-judgemental approach that provides emotional support for the individual can decrease the risk associated with suicide and self harm in the short term and promote long term improvements for the individual.



What is self-
harm?

Before trying to support someone who self harms it helps to understand a bit more about it.

Self harm means "people who injure or poison themselves non accidentally". This is accepted to be a result of emotional pain by someone who feels abandoned, alone and are not able to exhibit their feelings in another way. Allowing someone to talk about this can help them find ways to cope.

Are all
people who self-harm
suicidal?

People self harm for a number of reasons. To cope. To feel more in control. To feel a temporary positive emotion. To provide physical comfort for themselves by tending their wounds. To show us how much emotional pain they are in.

Self-harm is not always linked to suicidal feelings. Self-harm comes from people trying to cope with feelings that would otherwise overwhelm them. They are responding to the challenges in their lives. Self-harm is still unsafe and can cause accidental death

It is important to remember self-harming can increase the risk of suicide. Many people who die by suicide have a history of self harm. There is also a risk of accidental death with people who self harm. Focusing on caring for these people is important to reduce suicide.

What about
suicide?

People in suicidal crisis are experiencing suicidal thoughts, feelings or plans. Suicide is still regarded as taboo. There is still a reluctance to talk about this topic. By talking about it we can help people feel less alone and support them to consider a path that helps them to live. Talking allows someone to examine the concept of their own death.

How can we
reduce stigma around
suicide?

It is important to explore difficult topics with someone and be sensitive to their feelings. By accepting and supporting them with their pain we can help them find a way to live.

Suicide is an area people often shy away from, however talking can help people understand their feelings and hopefully find a way of coping with feelings that may otherwise overwhelm them.

There is a lot of negative language still used when talking about suicide. Avoid phrases like a successful suicide, an unsuccessful attempt, commit suicide, suicide victim, a cry for help or a suicide-prone person.

Instead try to say die by suicide, a suicide, take their own life, a suicide attempt, a completed suicide, person at risk of suicide and help prevent suicide. These simple changes in language are important to help reduce stigma.

This section provides support on how to approach "difficult subjects", tips on what to say, how to understand difference between thoughts and plans and tips on helping individuals cope. You can also watch role plays of a good and bad example of how to structure a conversation, which help you consider your own approach with people in distress.

How to approach someone and help them open up.

Emotional support means accepting people in a non-judgemental way. This allows them to share their feelings and hopefully find ways to cope.

It encourages us to see how the individual views what is happening to them. It provides an opportunity to explore any difficult feelings they may be having, especially around self-harm and suicide. It does not shy away from distress but allows a safe place to explore this.

Helping people open up allows us to engage in the best way for the individual. Don't rush them, just allow them the space to start. Reassurance will help and hopefully they will be able to open up.

Simply introducing yourself is a start. Asking a simple question like "how are you?" can lead someone to explore their feelings. Explain you are willing to help if needed. Use phrases such as "sometimes talking can help you see a way forward" or "I know life can be incredibly hard sometimes but maybe talking about it will help"

Be aware they may not want to talk straight away. But showing you care and are there if they need you may lead them to open up.

Follow the link to view a role play of a bad example of emotional support: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Im3WWnA1YjA&t=2s>

Follow the link to view a role play of a good example of emotional support: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKZgySWRFMU>

Empathy and Sympathy

Both sympathy and empathy are reactions to people's feelings. Sympathy looks at how we feel about what is happening to another person. How we would be affected and how we think it must be affecting them. Sympathy makes you feel pity for someone but it does not help really appreciate their distress.

Empathy is different. It looks at the situation from their point of view. We see things through their eyes, looking at their feelings not our own. People react to situations in different ways and empathy helps us understand this. To be empathetic we need to listen, consider how the situation is affecting them and confirm what we have learnt. Empathy helps us accept the world through the person's eyes.

Follow the link to view a role play of a bad example of empathy:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=st5a0a0ACjg>

Follow the link to view a role play of a good example of empathy:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEQCZyH_SBU

Body Language

Body language accounts for over half of what we communicate to others. A person's words only show a little about how they are feeling. Being aware of our body language and our tone of voice can help us to build a good relationship with the person.

Try to reflect (not imitate) the person's body language. This could include their hand gestures, facial expression and eye contact. To begin with try just one and build this up as you become more confident. Matching their tone of voice also helps. Try to complement their tone, pace and volume. However, if someone is very upset a lower, quieter tone may help to calm them.

Listening

Listening helps us to develop trust, encourage the person to talk and create a bond.

People often feel relief at being able to talk about what troubling them. It can guide the listener towards what is really worrying them.

Before you start it is important to find a good time and place. A crowded busy room may cause distractions. A quiet, private place helps encourage the individual to open up.

How to listen

Encouraging - This can help the persons to carry on talking. Use short words like "I see" or "go on". If someone seems stuck with what they want to say it may help to use a phrase like "its ok, just take your time". This shows its ok for the person to go at their own pace.

Reacting - This helps the person see you have heard what they have said. Use phrases like "that sounds..." or "it sounds like you've....". This is a good way to show empathy.

Reflecting -This involve repeating back what a person is saying. Use phrases like "you say...." This can show the person we understand their feelings and it also allows the person to hear what they have said and think about their words.

Clarifying - This can allow you to expand on something that you are unsure about or to help draw out an area that may be hard to talk about. Use phrases like "what do you mean when you say.....", "tell me more about...." or "do you mean that....".

Summarising - This helps show you have been listening and are trying to understand the person's meaning. Use phrases like "So you feel...." or "So you're saying...". This helps the person see the emotions they have used and can help them appreciate their feelings.

However, sometimes when a person is very distressed they may struggle to talk about their feelings. You may find just letting them tell their story can help them to feel supported.

Follow the link to view a role play of a bad example of how to help someone open up: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPne1FpprBs>

Follow the link to view a role play of a good example of how to help someone open up: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0e6jL1cLjgw>

Open and closed questions

Open questions help us to encourage people to say more than a simple yes or no. They include questions which start with where, when, what and how?

Use phrases like "How are you coping right now?", "When did you realise?", "What happened when...?" and "How did that feel?".

Question can also be used to refocus on a particularly difficult area. Using phrases like "earlier you said... and How do you feel about that now?"

Closed questions can help us to understand. For example if you ask "are you feeling sad" the person can either say no and you can move away from this or yes and you can explore it further.

Avoid using questions that start with why. This can sound judgmental. "Why did you....?" sounds very different to "Can you tell me what led you to....?".

Things to remember

Although this approach is about supporting people in distress, the words emotional distress can be difficult for people to hear instead you could use words like struggling to cope, afraid/fearful, worry/troubles, upset, difficult time/feeling or in pain/hurting.

This can also help in clarifying the right feeling for the person and help show you are truly trying to understand.

The environment around you can make listening difficult. Noise and interruptions can stop people from opening up. Try finding a quiet space without interruption to give the person space to talk.

How to Approach Self Harm

When someone self harms there is usually a cause or an increase in emotion. This can cause the person to want to act on this and this can be when they self harm. They may feel relief or even calm after this. This however does not last and this can cause them to want to keep self harming. The cause of the issue has not gone away.

To approach someone who self harms can be scary. There is a worry we can make things worse. But talking and listening can help someone to deal with their feelings. It helps to not be afraid of confronting difficult topics but to show you want to hear how they are feeling and try to understand.

Follow the link to view a role play of why someone might self harm: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bKfq6BayKA>

As well as empathising and using open questions phrases like "how do you feel when you cut?" can help someone open up about self harm.

Remember people have often self harmed for a long time so expecting them to stop straight away, will be difficult for them.

However, talking about it can give them the first steps to finding other ways to cope.

How to approach suicidal feelings/thoughts

Suicide can be explored as part of the previous listening materials. However it is helpful to have some phrases that can help to explore suicide specifically such as "are you saying that you want to die?", "what will you miss most about life?", "what do you expect death to be like for you?" or "what plans have you made for your death?".

Another good phrase is "do you want to be dead forever or is this the only way you can see for the pain you're feeling to end?". This helps the person look at whether they truly want to die or they just want whatever is troubling them to stop.

Follow the link to view a role play of a bad example of how to approach suicide: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKSbpsYITH0>

Follow the link to view role play of a good example of how to approach suicide: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4WtFVZfG8s>

These approaches although direct show a willingness to talk openly about suicide. It can help people work towards a path that does not result in their death and can show we are truly willing to empathise with them.

The ending

Endings are hard especially if you feel someone is still in distress. We may worry about what will happen next. We might feel there is more they need to tell us. The person may have felt held by us and find it hard to let go. They may suddenly be alone again with their problems.

It helps to ask about the future at this point. Phrases like "where do you go from here" or "what would you like to happen next" may help.

It is important to also know how to encourage people to get the help they may need. Use phrases like "who else have you talked to about this?" or "what do you think about getting some help?" This helps support people to make decisions for themselves by guiding rather than deciding for them. It encourages them to take control of what is happening to them.

This section focus on further help that can be offered to people. It also looks at the importance of self care for people who look after others.

Alternatives to Self Harm

When supporting someone who self harms knowing some alternatives can help someone start to consider other ways of coping with their distress. Here are some ideas of things to suggest:

Hit a cushion or throw a cushion at a wall.
Hold an ice cube in your hand.
Draw on the place you cut with red pen.
Flick a rubber band on your wrist.
Make a list of things you are thankful for.
Make a wish list to look at when you feel sad.
Allow yourself to cry.
Express your feeling, draw a picture, write a poem or take a photograph.
Make a memory box.
Have a bath/shower.
Massage your hands and arms.
Stroke a pet/ cuddle a teddy.
Do a puzzle or read a book.

For further ideas of alternatives to self harm try

www.getselfhelp.co.uk

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk

www.unstuck.com

Samaritans

For anyone who is struggling with distress, self harm and suicide Samaritans can provide confidential, non-judgemental support. Samaritans promote the essence of emotional support. They won't advise or tell people how to feel. They are willing to support people regardless of how bad they are feeling. They will explore suicide and self harm.

To contact Samaritans:

Freephone 116 123

Email jo@samaritans.org.uk

Write to Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA.

Further support

MIND: provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing mental health problems.

Telephone 0300 123 3393

<http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/>

YOUNG MINDS: is the UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.

Telephone 0800 802 5544.

NHS non-emergency Telephone 111

NHS emergency Telephone 999

Or contact your local Mental Health Liaison Team or IAPT services for advice.

Now you

You're on a plane listening to the safety announcement when the flight attendant explains you should put the oxygen mask on yourself before helping someone else. We all nod along but in reality how many of us would care for ourselves before others. When you're busy supporting others it is very easy to overlook your own self care. But when your caring for anyone it is important to take time to look after yourself.

We all have times when we feel stressed, emotional, insecure and anxious. This is absolutely normal and understandable when you are under pressure but not taking time for yourself could have an impact on your ability to cope with the demands of your role.

Just Breathe - It really is that simple! When you're feeling like everything is getting on top of you just take time to take a breath. Even a short pause in your day can help.

Nutrition - Eat regular balanced meals. Some people like to graze and others benefit from 3 meals a day. Whichever you prefer feeding your body can help reduce physical exhaustion and help improve your wellbeing. But don't feel guilty about a bit of indulgence. If you want a piece of cake or chocolate you've earned it!

Have fun - Take time to have fun. Getting together with friends, watching a funny film or doing something silly can help to improve your state of mind. Go on a swing or dance like no one is watching. Whatever you do enjoy it, don't worry about what anyone else thinks, just letting go for a few minutes can be a relief.

Have a good work life balance - Taking time out is very important when you care for others. Just finishing work early once a month gives you something to look forward to. Switch off your work email at home and have a break. It is also useful to get support from others, friends, family or even a therapist. Talking is a good way to help boost your emotional health. Make the most of the support around you, you don't have to go it alone (see the list at the end of this document for further support).

Take a break - Taking time to relax can sometimes seem like a bit of a luxury. But it is an important part of taking care of your emotional wellbeing. Spend time with family and friends, go for a walk, do something you enjoy or a hobby that helps you feel distracted, listen to a favourite piece of music or watch your favourite tv show.

Sleep - When you have hectic life sleep often feels like a bit of an indulgence. However, taking time to sleep and recharge your batteries can make you feel better and cope with stress. A nice environment will help aid sleep. Make your bedroom a sanctuary with a comfortable bed, nice sheets, cosy pyjamas and soft lighting. Avoid using a phone in bed as the white light will keep you awake. Having a warm bath and trying to get into a bedtime routine will help aid your sleep.

Treat yourself - You work very very hard and deserve a little treat sometimes. Buy yourself a hand cream and give yourself a hand

massage. Cook a nice meal, set a tray with a napkin and sit down and enjoy your food. Buy yourself a bag of your favourite sweets. Buy yourself some flowers. Send yourself a well done card. Treats don't have to cost the earth but a little something now and again will boost your mood.

Take time to reflect - When we are busy we often don't have time to step back and think about all the amazing things we have achieved. Write down all the impressive things you've done that day or just concentrate on the good things in your life for 10 minutes. This can help you reclaim your sense of wellbeing and move your focus back to the positive things in your life.

Get some exercise - When tired exercise is the last thing we fancy doing but as you probably already know it really is a great mood booster. Whether it's a run, a walk with the dog, swimming, a Zumba class or even learning to dance, a period of activity a couple of times a week can help you feel more positive, alert and ready to take on the world.

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