



How to start the conversation

In this guide we will talk you through the beginning stages of supporting us in a crisis, and provide practical hints and tips on how to set up for a meaningful conversation

Key learning points:

By the end of this guide you will have:

- Practical steps to set the conversation up for success
- Insight into building and maintaining positive relationships with us
- Tips to help us feel comfortable with you in-person, online and over the phone

Meeting us

Many young people report feeling nervous, uncomfortable or even scared when they first meet the person who will be supporting them. It can be hard to open up to a stranger, especially when it's about something you're really struggling with. To start off we're going to go through the steps of meeting a new young person, and what you can do to help us feel safe and comfortable with you.

Before you begin the assessment or conversation, introduce yourself and say your pronouns. A pronoun is how we refer to someone in the third person. Some common ones are she/her/hers/, they/them/theirs and he/him/his.

Then, ask them to introduce themselves. Ask if they have a name they would prefer you use, and if they feel comfortable sharing their pronouns. Thank them for sharing, and be sure to honour and respect both their name and pronouns. If you're going to make the effort to show that you are inclusive and respectful, you must fully follow through and use their correct pronouns and name during this interaction and beyond.

This would also be a good opportunity to ask if they would find alternative ways of communicating helpful. Communication might cause barriers, but you can work with them to figure out a communication strategy that works for both of you.

How to start the conversation

Body language

When you first meet us, body language and tone of voice are incredibly important in helping us feel comfortable. Making eye contact, sitting up straight, smiling and focusing on the us can help us feel safe. Meet us where we are to ensure that we are not overwhelmed or intimidated.

Being calm, relaxed and not visibly in a rush will also help. During a crisis, we may have a lot going on inside and might feel overwhelmed or anxious about this meeting - being a calm presence can really go a long way.

It can be off-putting if you are hunched over or buried in your notes. We know that you sometimes need to make or consult notes. If this is the case, tell us what you are doing, and check that we understand and feel comfortable with what you have written. This shows that you are paying attention and what we are saying is important.

These tips can also be applied to phone or online services. When body language is no longer a factor, tone of voice and other communication methods become even more important. Remember to keep your voice relaxed and welcoming, or if online, use emojis or tone descriptors to ensure you aren't misunderstood.

Supporting us by phone?

We've outlined some of the pro's and cons of supporting us over the phone, and how you can address the parts that are most difficult.

The advantages of telephone support

- You can keep anonymity, which you can't in-person
- You can call whenever and from wherever, including late at night - this can be safer than going alone to a hospital
- It can be a good form of support in between main areas of support that you might have (friends/family, or treatments)
- Our parents don't have to get involved. We can call without needing our parents/carers knowledge, which can feel more comfortable for us.
- It doesn't matter how you look - sometimes in crisis you don't want to show yourself or the state that you're in physically
- Covid has changed the way we think and behave - a phone call can be a good way of staying connected and getting the help you need in a crisis when you have limited resources due to restrictions

How to start the conversation

The disadvantages of telephone support

- It can feel impersonal - there's no emotional connection to someone on the line who you don't know
- Having to tell your story all over again can be tiring
- The idea of being disconnected or your phone running out of battery/credit can be stressful and distracting
- Can feel worried about the call going on records and bills
- It can be difficult having people at home or in public places overhearing, especially if they aren't supportive or don't know about your difficulties
- Using phone minutes/data/credit can be an additional worry

Ideas for addressing the disadvantages

Try and be aware of the surroundings of the young person you're talking to - maybe even start by asking, "Is there anyone around you that's making you feel self-conscious about talking?"

Use genuine affirmative sounds occasionally to show you're listening and that you are still on the call.

Offer alternatives for people struggling with calls - "If you're too anxious to carry on talking, here are some text services or web chats that you could use instead."

Being on the phone can be quite impersonal, so the ability to chat/joke can be even more important in keeping us on the line. Another option is to have somewhere people can see a picture of the person they are talking to with a random fact about them, e.g. on the website

Reassure from the start what could/will happen if we get disconnected. E.g. Can they call up again and speak to the same person? Will the service call back?

Some of us prefer texting but then struggle with waiting for replies - let us know if that's an option and, if so, how long we might expect to have to wait for a reply

Finally, acknowledge and validate our experiences.

This was taken from our report "Supporting us in crisis, 2020"

Building the conversation

When beginning any conversation, speak directly to us, not at or over us. And especially don't speak as if we are not in the room. This can be an incredibly belittling experience and will not set us up to work positively together.

The first step to building a relationship and ensuring you are able to positively support the young person is to let them know that you are trustworthy, non-judgemental and will be here to listen.

Open up the conversation by asking things about us - not necessarily about mental health, but about our interests, hobbies, or favourite subject in school. Talk to us about what we want to talk about.

It can also be helpful to share some similar information about yourself. This will help us trust you and therefore feel more comfortable opening up and receiving support from you.

"It really helps me when people focus not just on the crisis, but on other activities that I enjoy or other parts of me, because that can de-escalate the crisis for me."

Asking us "What brought you here today?" is a great starting point whether we are in the room, online or over the phone. Allowing us to lead the conversation if we feel comfortable can make us feel like we have more control over the situation. Much of the time we are aware of our needs and what helps us feel safe. Perhaps, asking what brought us here can be enough to help you support us.

Always be honest about what you can and can't do, and avoid making promises you are unlikely to be able to keep. It will make it harder to progress to difficult topics in the conversation.

We can find it draining or even traumatising to go through our full history, especially if we are asked to repeat it to multiple people. You don't necessarily need to go through our entire history to find out what we need and how best to support us.

Ask what might be helpful for us, and allow for that to be possible. We might know exactly what we need from you. If we don't, that's okay and we can still figure it out together. Many young people are aware of their mental health needs and what helps them feel more safe.

Lastly, using the personal skills or qualities you already have can help us feel comfortable and at ease, and can build a connection that will help us as the conversation progresses.

Reflection space

Where do you feel least comfortable in offering support (online, in person or over the phone)? How can the insights provided here help you in your practice?

What are your strengths? How can you bring these into a conversation with a young person to help them feel more at ease?

Listening and responding

Now that you have set the tone, how do you continue to ensure this is a meaningful and beneficial conversation?

No matter what our goals for the meeting are, one of the key things to practice with each young person you meet is active listening. We describe this as listening to understand, and not listening to respond. Doing your best to take in what the young person is saying, and not attaching your own judgements or opinions to their situation. We often don't want advice right away. We'd much rather you listen to try and understand what's going on for us, and ask questions when you need clarification.

We understand that what you can actually provide for us is often limited, but offering genuine interest and listening fully can help us feel understood, and remind us that we are worthy of help. You don't need to try and fix things. Be along side us to listen and support, not necessarily to change the situation we're in.

Validation and appreciation also shows that you are listening and understanding what we are saying. If something sounds difficult or hard to manage, you can say that. You are not expected to always relate to what we are going through, but empathising can go a long way. If we are having a hard time opening up, or is hesitant or unsure, here are some helpful phrases from young people:

"Take all the time you need - I'll be here to listen"

"You're not under any pressure, and I'm not going to leave until you're ready"

"You're not alone"

"I'm here to listen and understand and care for you"

How to start the conversation

Reminding us that we don't need to share or say everything all at once, and that we can take our time will help us to feel more comfortable and relaxed. Remind us that it does matter, and it is important that we are heard.

Using overly complex or medical language is not helpful - unless we are using that language already. Try and level in terms of language used, because if those words aren't used, bringing them up might be unpleasant.

You can also show appreciation to us for opening up and sharing with you. Let us know that you understand how hard that can be to share, and that you're happy that they we comfortable enough to open up.

Validate what we have told you. If something sounds difficult or hard to manage, say that! It can be really helpful to have your experiences understood and your emotions and perspective validated.

Remind us that it is okay to cry and be upset, and that you will still be there to listen and provide support.

We hope that sharing these perspectives and advice directly from young people will open up meaningful conversations and positive experiences for both you and the young people you see.

Reflection space

Are there any additional phrases that you have found helpful when a young person appears hesitant?

How can you let a young person know that you're listening, when online or the phone?

Conclusion

We hope that the steps, useful phrases and do's and don'ts provided in this video can help you start an in-person, online or telephone conversation with a young person in crisis. Due to the growing popularity of online and telephone support, we have included the pros and cons of online/phone support to build your confidence supporting young people on these platforms. Remember that your own personality and flare is also just as important during the conversation, and will make the conversation feel more natural.

Ask clarification questions, when necessary, and actively listen so you can effectively respond or validate the young person's experience. The conversations can be difficult (emotionally) for the young person so make sure the young person feels like it is okay to cry and be upset, and that you will still be there to listen and provide support. Humanise them and make them feel valued.

You can view the video guide for this document for free at www.crisistools.org.uk

This learning guide was produced with support from NHS England



About Crisis Tools

Unique, co-produced learning guides to increase knowledge and confidence for anyone supporting young people in a mental health crisis.

Crisis Tools is relevant to anyone who may find themselves supporting a young person in crisis including parents, carers and professionals. The Crisis Tools website features a resource sharing hub and bite-sized learning guides aimed at improving your knowledge and understanding of young people's experiences when getting help in crisis. Co-designed and delivered by young people with lived experience, these unique learning guides will cover key themes including attitudes, communication, practical strategies and complexities when delivering care remotely.

Crisis Tools is complementary to, but not a replacement for, clinical training. This unique program is designed to amplify the voices of young people.

www.crisistools.org.uk