

Telephone Peer Support

Telephone support is well established. Helplines have been operating for a long time, the Samaritans being a good example of telephone support offered by trained volunteers to people in crisis.

Explosion of mobile phones means that for more and more people, phones have become the main, and very important source of communication and access to the outside world.

For peer support purposes, Peer Support Volunteers (PSVs) need to be able to develop a feeling of empathy and active listening when supporting by telephone.

Issues to consider for telephone support:

Lack of Visual Clues:

Harder for PSV to gauge how the person is feeling

Cannot use body language to show the person that the PSV is attentive and actively listening

Easier to make assumptions about caller and take what is being said on face value

Minimal encouragers or verbal gesturing is important in telephone support – use of ‘mm,’ ‘yes,’ ‘I see,’ ‘aha’ and so on.

Dialects and Accents/Interference

The way people speak, including their dialect or accent can sound stronger on the phone. In addition, interference or a bad reception can affect understanding when someone is speaking.

It is perfectly acceptable to ask for clarification when someone is speaking as it is important to make sure that the PSV has properly understood what has been said to them. Asking for clarification makes it easier for the person to do the same.

Noise Interference

There may be times when noise pollution can affect the quality of the call. It may also interrupt the flow of the conversation, and make the PSV or person concerned that there may be another person in the room.

If there is background noise when the call is taking place, explain what it is – or ask the person what the noise is if interference can be heard at their end of the call.

If there is sudden interference, e.g. a bang, or the sound of a door opening, explain what is happening or ask what is happening. If the confidentiality of the call is being compromised, either wait for the interference to end and resume the call or terminate the call and arrange another time to speak

Interrupting

There may be times when the PSV needs to interrupt the person they are supporting during a call. This might be if the person is, for example:

- Going over time
- Straying across a boundary
- Introducing inappropriate topics
- Introducing third party information that could compromise another person's confidentiality.

Methods for interrupting the flow of the conversation could be to stop talking and not responding to anything that is being said. Another method could be to talk over the person.

Neither of the above methods is easy – or what is recommended in order to be a ‘good listener’. However, at times if the safety of the conversation is at stake it may be necessary to use the above rather extreme methods. Once the conversation has halted, it is important to explain why such action has been taken.

There may also be times when interruption is necessary if the caller is going round in circles and is not clear. The PSV may need to interrupt to help the person get on track and re-focus.

Again, this is not always easy but it is possible to remain empathetic and use language such as: ‘I can hear you have a lot to say about this but I’m getting muddled with all the information....can we just go back to....?’

Silences

Silence can be harder to manage on the phone, especially as there is no visual clue. People can be silent for many reasons including:

- Trying to remain composed if they think they may start to cry – or laugh!
- Trying to gather thoughts and think about how to say what they want to say
- Their mind has gone blank
- They may be thinking about something that has just been said to them.

It is harder to manage silence on the phone when there are no visual clues, but just as when talking to someone face to face, if there is a gap the PSV should try not to jump to fill it. If the person they are supporting is just trying to gather their thoughts and think about what to say next, it is better to give them space.

The PSV may also want to use silence rather than interrupting in the case of a PSV going off point or introducing an inappropriate topic, for example. Rather than interrupting, the silence may help to signal to the person that the PSV does not want to pursue a particular line of conversation, or that you have nothing to add/say.

Silence does have to be managed carefully, so that the person being supported does not feel alienated, or not listened to. If a PSV has used silence, they should explain why.

Ending the call

Just as for face to face support, the PSV will need to be mindful to draw the telephone conversation to a close, rather than a rushed ‘I’ve got to go now – bye!’ The person supported should leave the conversation feeling that their experience has been positive, that they are clear about what has been discussed, what will happen next, and when they will be talking to the PSV again.

It is important to structure the call just as a face to face meeting would be structured so that the time is being managed in much the same way. The PSV should agree with the person supported the best way to manage the time. For example, they can let the person know when the call is half way through and again when there is 10 mins/5 mins left, to avoid a rushed ending.