Conversations with young people about their mental health

In your role, you will need to be able to talk to young people about some of their difficulties. This may be a difficult task for you. You may not know the young person very well, you may feel uncomfortable about the subject and you may be worried by talking about it you could make things worse. You do not need to have all of the answers. At this moment, you are showing that you care and want to support the young person. The important matter is that you make yourself available for the young person to be able to speak to you.

Every young person is different and your understanding of and/ or knowledge about how a young person will respond is important to consider. As a professional you need to make the judgement if it is an appropriate time/ place to begin the conversation with a young person. You are in the best position to make this decision; this information guide has been produced to support you in this.

Young people come to staff for help. All staff have a responsibility to safeguarding children and young people. This means that you must act on concerns and never agree to something that could result in potential or real harm to the young person. This may be difficult for the young person to appreciate. Therefore, it is vitally important to discuss confidentiality with a young person at the earliest possible opportunity. If a young person discloses an issue that you may have to act on, and therefore breach confidentiality; you can ask them to recall your previous discussion about confidentiality. For further information about confidentiality and safeguarding issues the Cambridge and Peterborough Safeguarding Children procedures can be accessed [here](http://cambridgeshirescb.proceduresonline.com)

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| It can be difficult to start a conversation, sometimes the young person is struggling with the words to describe how they feel. In this instance you could try starting a conversation with open questions such as …….. |
| 'What happened about...', 'Tell me about...', 'How do you feel about...' |
| When – 'When did you realise?' |
| Where – 'Where did that happen?' |
| What – 'What else happened?' |
| How – 'How did that feel?' |

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| You could comment on what you have observed about the young person… |
| Ive noticed that………….. |

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| You could use active listening and acknowledging phrases such as……. |
| “Can I just check that I have understood what you mean?” |
| “That sounds very scary for you. Let’s see how we can work out together to help.” |
| “It must be hard for you to discuss this, you are doing so well” |

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| Here are some things that help and things that do not help when engaging with young people: | |
| Do | **Do not** |
| Make time and find a safe place to listen. | Offer quick solutions, enable the young person to tell their story. |
| Make the young person the focus of your attention | Do not judge |
| Acknowledge how difficult the conversation may be for the young person | React with distaste/ disgust |
| Let the young person tell their story and listen to what is being said ; check and clarify the young person’s meaning, e.g*. ‘I ve had enough…’* …………..Of what??? | Ignore what the young person expresses, no matter how trivial it appears to you. It is valid and has meaning to the young person. |
| Respond with concern rather than anxiety or distaste | Assume someone else is helping the young person. They have come to you to ask for help. |
| Be aware of the limitations within your professional role. |  |
| Agree what you will do next to support the young person and who you will contact from other agencies for advice or to refer on where needed. |  |
| Look after yourself. The young person’s distress will evoke strong emotions in you. Seek supervision to deal with issues raised. |  |

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| After the conversation, and as part of your agreed plan with the young person you could offer some practical advice to help the young person in their daily life: |
| Practical strategies |
| Address triggers and stressors – work with the young person to understand their triggers and stressors. Working through a typical day and develop, with the young person, ways in which to manage areas of difficulties. |
| Make a tool box to help the young person: work with the young person to recognise and use a range of different things they know helps them; spending time with friends/family/ pets, listening to music, colouring, reading, collecting poetry, photographs or inspirational quotes. |
| Discuss resources available – keepyourhead.com and other safe resources young people can access. |

For more of a structured framework after enabling a conversation to take place please see the

questions in the box below:

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| Emotional Health and Wellbeing Questions | |
| Consideration of risk factors | |
| What are your main concerns (Please include any possible triggers, duration and severity of problems)? | |
| How long have these issues been occurring? |  |
| How much does it impact on their daily life. Please rate this 0-10 (0 is no impact and 10 is child unable to function in usual daily activities, e,g, school, leisure, friends? |  |
| How worrying would you rate this 0-10 (0 being not very worrying 10 being the most)? | |
| What is the worst issue for you? What would be the worst outcome? How likely is this to happen? | |
| What have you found doesn’t work or you don’t like? | |
| Consideration of resilience /protective factors | |
| How would you know if things got better?  (what would be happening in the yp life that is not yet happening?) | |
| What has worked for yp/family best / who did this…what can help (please include any previous interventions by services if any)? | |
| What is working well currently? | |
| What are your ideas for the next steps? | |
| Who else could we involve? | |
| Has this conversation helped? | |
| In summary, what are your ideas about what needs to change and why? Please describe how much you and your family agree on these conclusions? | |

## References, further reading and useful resources:

<http://www.keep-your-head.com/CP-MHS>

<http://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help-you/supporting-someone-online/having-conversation-person>

<http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/blog/self-harm-5-minute-conversation-first-step>

<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/assets/0002/6727/No_Harm_Done_Professionals_Pack.pdf>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/talking-about-difficult-topics/>