

Young people struggling with mental health and emotional well-being issues can be difficult to reach, but the thing they need above all is for someone to listen to them and support them. By listening in this way we can also find the best ways to support others in their situation. Please read some excellent advice below from young people, in their own words, along with some additional ideas to help you as practitioners

Focus on listening

“She listened, and I mean REALLY listened. She didn’t interrupt me or ask me to explain myself or anything, she just let me talk and talk and talk. I had been unsure about talking to anyone but I knew quite quickly that I’d chosen the right person to talk to and that it would be a turning point.”

Listening is the best thing you can possibly do. If a young person has come to you, it’s because they trust you and feel a need to share their difficulties with someone. Just let them talk. Ask occasional open questions if you need to in order to encourage them to keep exploring their feelings and opening up to you. Just letting them pour out what they’re thinking will make a huge difference and marks a huge first step in recovery. Up until now they may not have admitted even to themselves that there is a problem.

Don’t talk too much

“Sometimes it’s hard to explain what’s going on in my head – it doesn’t make a lot of sense and I’ve kind of gotten used to keeping myself to myself. But just ‘cos I’m struggling to find the right words doesn’t mean you should help me. Just keep quiet, I’ll get there in the end.”

The pupil should be talking at least three quarters of the time. If that’s not the case then you need to redress the balance. You are here to listen, not to talk. Sometimes the conversation may lapse into silence. Try not to give in to the urge to fill the gap, but rather wait until the pupil does so. This can often lead to them exploring their feelings more deeply. Of course, you should interject occasionally, perhaps with questions to the pupil to explore certain topics they’ve touched on more deeply, or to show that you understand and are supportive. Don’t feel an urge to over-analyse the situation or try to offer answers. This all comes later. For now your role is simply one of supportive listener. So make sure you’re listening!

Drop everything

“I knew he was taking me seriously because the first thing he did was to sit me down quietly whilst he called the head teacher to arrange for someone else to teach his next lesson. That sort of scared me but more than that it made me realise that he actually cared about what I was going to tell him and that he really wanted to help.”

A pupil will have to build up quite a lot of courage to have a conversation with you about difficulties, so if you suddenly have to dash off to do lunch duty after five minutes it can really shake their confidence. Although you may legitimately need to be somewhere else, their low self-esteem is likely to make the pupil interpret the situation negatively and assume that you aren’t interested in what they have to say or you don’t want to help them or are disgusted by them.

So make sure you have plenty of interruption free time before you sit down to talk to a pupil. This can feel frustrating if a pupil says they want to talk and due to your other commitments you have to send them away until later – but if you make it crystal clear that it's because you want to have enough time to really listen to what they have to say, and offer what support you can, then they will understand. You should agree a time and place to meet again as soon as possible and ensure that you are where you say you'll be. If for any reason you can't keep to the agreed time or place, you MUST let the pupil know.

Don't pretend to understand

"I think that all teachers got taught on some course somewhere to say 'I understand how that must feel' the moment you open up. YOU DON'T – don't even pretend to, it's not helpful, it's insulting."

The concept of a mental health difficulty such as an eating disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) can seem completely alien if you've never experienced these difficulties first hand. You may find yourself wondering why on earth someone would do these things to themselves, but don't explore those feelings with the sufferer. Instead listen hard to what they're saying and encourage them to talk and you'll slowly start to understand what steps they might be ready to take in order to start making some changes.

Don't be afraid to make eye contact

"She was so disgusted by what I told her that she couldn't bear to look at me."

It's important to try to maintain a natural level of eye contact (even if you have to think very hard about doing so and it doesn't feel natural to you at all). If you make too much eye contact, the pupil may interpret this as you staring at them, perhaps because you are horrified about what they are saying or think they are a 'freak'. On the other hand, if you don't make eye contact at all then a student may interpret this as you being disgusted by them – to the extent that you can't bring yourself to look at them. Making an effort to maintain natural eye contact will convey a very positive message to the pupil.

Offer support

"I was worried how she'd react, but my Mum just listened then said 'How can I support you?' – no one had asked me that before and it made me realise that she cared. Between us we thought of some really practical things she could do to help me stop self-harming."

Never leave this kind of conversation without agreeing next steps. These might be as simple as agreeing to sit down again later in the day or might be agreeing with the pupil about who should be informed of the conversation and how. Whatever happens, you should have some form of next steps to carry out after the meeting because this will help the pupil to realise that you're working with them to move things forward.

Acknowledge how hard it is to discuss these issues

"Talking about my bingeing for the first time was the hardest thing I ever did. When I was done talking, my teacher looked me in the eye and said 'That must have been really tough' – he was right, it was, but it meant so much that he realised what a big deal it was for me."

It can take a young person weeks or even months to admit to themselves that they have a problem, let alone share that with anyone else. If a pupil chooses to confide in you then you should feel proud and privileged that they have such a high level of trust in you. Acknowledging both how brave the pupil has been, and how glad you are they chose to speak to you, conveys positive messages or support to the pupil.

Persevere

“I think she thought I would never open up. It was probably after she’d outstretched a hand of support about eight times that I finally began to talk, falteringly. If she hadn’t have kept trying and trying I’d probably still be sitting in that deep pit of depression now.”

Recovery is a slow process. Don’t expect to see changes any time soon. The first huge hurdle for young people to overcome is getting to a point where they’re ready to even consider accepting help. You can help by continuing to listen and offer your support.

Don’t assume that an apparently negative response is actually a negative response

“The anorexic voice in my head was telling me to push help away so I was saying no. But there was a tiny part of me that wanted to get better. I just couldn’t say it out loud or else I’d have to punish myself.”

Despite the fact that a young person has confided in you, and may even have expressed a desire to get on top of their illness, that doesn’t mean they’ll readily accept help. The illness may ensure they resist any form of help for as long as they possibly can. Don’t be offended or upset if your offers of help are met with anger, indifference or insolence, it’s the illness talking, not the pupil.

Never break your promises

“If you say you’ll be there, be there. If you say you’ll keep it a secret, keep it a secret. Whatever you say you’ll do you have to do or else the trust we’ve built in you will be smashed to smithereens. And never lie. Just be honest. If you’re going to tell someone just be upfront about it, we can handle that, what we can’t handle is having our trust broken.”

Above all else, a pupil wants to know they can trust you. That means if they want you to keep their issues confidential and you can’t then you must be honest. You can also be honest about the fact you don’t have all the answers or aren’t exactly sure what will happen next. Consider yourself the pupil’s ally rather than their saviour and think about which next steps you can take together.

We hope you found this advice useful. Remember... if in doubt, keep quiet and listen!

Please also refer to any policies in your school relevant to emotional health and wellbeing of pupils and consult your head of pastoral care or child protection officer if in doubt.