

Communication Skills

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Listening

PART OF THE 'FIRST 33 HOURS' PROGRAMME FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL.

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Communication Skills for New Volunteers

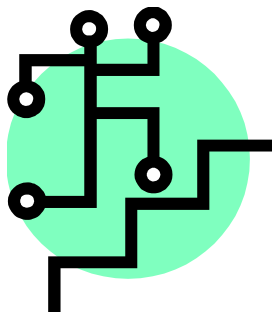
LISTENING

You might not feel like a superstar listener – yet. But you’ve had your first taste of volunteering in a clinical environment and hopefully a chance to reflect on that. Before you come in to the hospital for your next session, we’re going to explore how to listen – and why it’s worth it.

WHAT DO PATIENTS GET FROM BEING LISTENED TO?

- They feel understood.
- They feel cared about and accepted.
- It helps to make sense of things that have happened to them or are happening to them.
- It connects them with someone else when they’re probably feeling very isolated and perhaps abandoned because they’re in hospital.
- It helps release tension in a safe way.

It is easy to lose sight of *just how therapeutic it can be to be fully listened to*. Patients don’t always need answers, action or problem solving. Sometimes they can work things out for themselves. Patients can get a sense of respect from being listened to, and this is hugely valuable.



People who had led very active lives or who are used to *getting on with tasks* sometimes find it really difficult to accept that just listening is a valuable activity in itself. One volunteer, a retired nurse, said, ‘But I can chat while I *do* – I’m used to *doing* things!’ But if you’re doing something,

you're not actively listening.

WHY DO WE WANT TO BE BUSY?

A hospital ward or clinical environment is recognised as a busy place. How often do we hear phrases like 'I don't want to bother the nurses, they are so busy'. It's said in a tone of resignation but also, significantly, of admiration. It's part of our culture.

We (and nearly everyone feels this way to start with) want to be busy doing something. We believe that busy is virtuous, especially in a hospital. That's a shame, because if we could just let go of this need to be busy we'd find that we could relax and realise the value of just being there, listening to a patient.

Your time is really valuable. We recognise that it is much easier to donate money than time. You'll want your time used wisely and appropriately. Please remember that time spent listening to a patient can be one of the most rewarding things you'll do. It's just that you're not used to it yet, so you need a few skills. Be aware that if you engage in active listening you'll find it very worthwhile but exhausting. Don't spend too long with any one patient – 20 minutes is enough. And 20 minutes of active listening is worth an hour or more of everyday 'chit-chat'.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SHOW YOU'RE REALLY LISTENING TO SOMEONE.

- Be aware of your body language. Simply changing your posture can have an immediate, dramatic effect on how confident we feel and how others regard us.
- Recognise feelings and emotions by nodding or making small 'I'm following you' noises like 'uh-huh' and 'hmm'.
- If you've agreed to visit a patient, always find a chair and sit down. Never just stand there. It's bad for the patient as you're not at their eye level, and it's probably bad for your back and your feet!
- You don't have to agree with what the patient is saying to validate their emotion. You could say things like 'It sounds like you feel...' or 'You seem particularly anxious about that?' These are reflective sentences.
- Don't *assume* that the patient is feeling isolated.
- Be prepared to be a 'sounding board' – it's a valuable role, letting patients work out things for themselves by talking to an empathetic listener.

SILENCE

People tend to avoid silence because it makes us uncomfortable. But a few seconds of comfortable, supportive silence can be very powerful and comforting for a patient. Silence doesn't mean that nothing's happening. Pauses enable important thinking and emotional processing. But we have to get past the anxieties that silence can stir up in us!

Some volunteers worry that:

- The patient will think that they're boring.
- It's their 'job' to come up with something to say – often volunteers feel they should say something amusing or entertaining.
- The patient will be put under pressure to say something, and it will all feel very awkward.

These concerns are understandable, but there are many benefits to pauses and silences. It's a time for reflection, a breather, and if you can stay comfortable, it shows you are not in a rush.

APPRECIATING DIFFERENCE

Once we focus on an individual and what they're experiencing, we quickly learn not to make assumptions. Some people will have very different life experiences to our own. Courteous curiosity and self awareness help us to listen non-judgementally.

You will have your own attitudes, feelings and beliefs and these will inevitably influence how you see and interpret the patient's choices and interests.

BE YOURSELF

Practise being a good listener by really listening to peers, family members, friends and colleagues. Then you'll find it easier when you're with patients. For more ideas watch (and listen to!) a great TED talk by Julian Treasure called **5 ways to listen better**. It's on YouTube and www.TED.com