

PREFACE

Hi, I'm Aqseer. I'm bad at talking and good at listening. I'd talk, if only people would listen.

We all need to be listened to. If that need isn't met, there are high chances of falling mentally ill. I've experienced this first-hand.

An inability to ask for help results in several mental and emotional issues that can make it hard for us to function. By the time we realise that something's wrong, we need medication and therapy, and it could be years before we feel like ourselves again.

I'm an arts therapist and I have a difficult relationship with therapy.

This is why I believe that just training more experts isn't a sustainable solution to our mental-health crisis. We need more people out there, addressing these issues at an earlier stage. I'm confident that if listening were valued and treated as a skill-set to be developed, we could help prevent a lot of unnecessary pain.

We are each other's first support system - the experts come later. So what if we could support one another just a little bit better? This handbook is meant to help you do that.

Enjoy!

WHAT MAKES A FULFILLING CONVERSATION?

- 1 People's ability to listen to each other. Really listen. Instead of waiting impatiently for their turn to speak. So, the first thing you need to do is be patient.



Stop talking. Stop fidgeting. Zone in. This is an important thing you're doing. If you'd rather be on the phone or inside your head, do just that instead.

- 2 Secondly, be empathetic. This means to feel being in another person's situation. Or shoes. Don't know what this means? Think of your go-to agony aunt/uncle. What do they do that makes it so easy to talk to them? Copy that. But don't make the mistake of thinking that you know what it's like to be the other person.

- 3 So, rule number three. Please don't waste time offering solutions or giving advice. Your job is to act as a mirror. A sounding board. The wall that they are playing emotional squash against. Forget the metaphor. Just try to ask [open-ended questions](#) that help the other person arrive at their own answer.

4 Lastly, [maintain boundaries](#) so that you don't get addicted to their drama. It's their life, not your entertainment. It's not up to you to fix it, much less rescue them from themselves.

A simple way of checking these is to examine your relationship with your phone. Are you leaving it on loud through the night, just in case they 'need' you? Are you repeatedly asking them about their co-dependent relationship, even when they haven't brought it up in weeks? If so, you need to work on your boundaries.

That's it! That's pretty much all you need to know.



Now to get good at listening, print the following handout, go through it a few times, and practice with a partner. The material has been adapted from [this](#) manual by Trinity College, Dublin.

Take turns to be listener and talker. Try 15 minutes each, and then debrief. Even better, work in 3s and take turns being observers for richer feedback and insight.

ACTIVE LISTENING HANDOUT

Body Language

- ✓ Nod
- ✓ Look interested, and be interested!
- ✓ Make eye contact
- ✓ Face them with an open posture. Don't cross your arms or legs and make sure that your shoulders are in line with theirs.
- ✓ Pay attention to their [body language](#) as well as your own. This gives you extra information when, for instance, someone is saying yes, but they're shaking their head no.
- Try not to fidget. DO NOT drum your fingers. If you're feeling restless, breathe through it. You can read about the technique [here](#).



Verbal communication

- ✓ Stop talking
- ✓ Make simple sounds of acknowledgment like 'hmm', 'go on', 'I'm listening', 'wow'
- ✓ Interrupt only if you will *die* if you don't. [I'm looking at you, gentlemen. Before you get your boxers in a twist, check [this](#) out. Always remember, it's not your fault, it's patriarchy.]
- ✓ Ask mostly open-ended questions. More on this below.



- ✓ Listen and concentrate instead of rehearsing what you'll say next. Don't stress. The person talking doesn't really need or want you to say too much.
- ✓ However, there are some people who want to know what you think they should do. This is your moment to shine - by resisting the temptation to swoop in with your little suitcase of solutions. Be the [Carl Rogers to their Gloria](#). Ask them what they think they should do, what makes them feel that you'd know them better than they know themselves, etc.



- ✓ Self disclosure is an exception to the 'stop talking' rule. Sometimes, it helps to talk just a little bit about yourself - such as how you responded to a similar struggle in the past. It can build trust and help the talker share further. It's also a good way to avoid telling them what to do while keeping the conversation going.
- ✓ Cultivate a relationship with silence. If you can sit through a pregnant pause, you're allowing the other person to go a bit deeper into their [conversation with themselves](#).
- ✓ Don't assume, don't judge. This is hard. So again, don't assume, don't judge. Ask for clarifications if you don't understand. It's okay not to agree, as long as you don't impose your opinion, and do try to understand where they're coming from.



What is being said?

Try to make sure they talk about all three of these:

- 1 **Experiences**
What has happened to them?
- 2 **Behaviour/actions**
What they choose to do or not do.
- 3 **Feelings**
The emotions that arise.



Ask your questions accordingly. Stay in touch with what is being communicated and keep the following in mind:

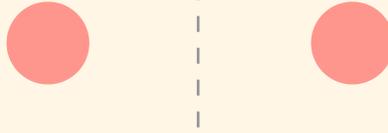


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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the core themes here?• What do they keep coming back to repeatedly?• What is their point of view and context? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do they want you to understand?• What need of theirs is not being met? [Go here to get introductory vocabulary around feelings and needs, so you can recognize yours as well as another person's.]• How would they like their need to be met? [Non-violent communication is a powerful and easy to understand process - observe feelings, identify needs and make requests - to listen to yourself and others. Start exploring here] |
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KEY TOOLS

Reflecting

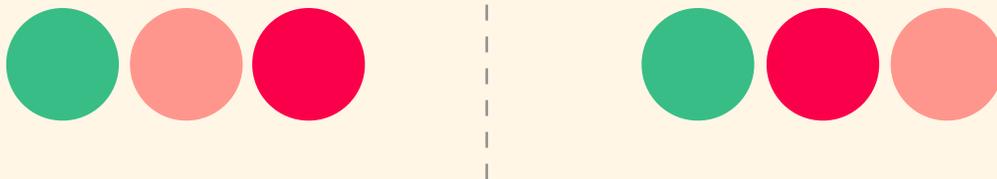


Reflecting is the easiest way to show someone that you're paying attention and want to hear more. Just repeat the last few words that they said.

For example - a friend tells you 'I'm scared to go out on dates because I feel ugly.' You can say - 'you feel ugly?'

That will tell the talker that you're not afraid to listen to her vulnerabilities. It shows empathy and interest. The usual response would be to quickly say 'You're NOT ugly! Don't be silly.' And that's not helpful, at all.

Paraphrasing



Paraphrasing is repeating what you've heard, seen and felt-them-feel in your own words. It is useful to make sure that you're both on the same page.

For example - a friend tells you that his father makes him feel like he will never be good enough, and he needs to drink to manage his anger. After some time, you could ask if you've understood him correctly by saying - 'You feel angry and helpless when your dad is always disappointed in you, and this makes you rely on drinking as an outlet?'



Some useful phrases for paraphrasing:

- ✓ I hear you saying that...
- ✓ If I understand correctly, you...

Note: the use of 'I' statements keeps the other person from feeling like you're blaming or criticising them. The following are not helpful:

- You're not making yourself clear.
- You're quite confused, aren't you?

A note on style

There are listeners that pride themselves on being solution focused, in that they will use their tool-kit to steer the person towards arriving at their own next steps. I'm one of them. It's not a style that is appropriate in every case.

There are people who just want to be heard, who don't feel the need to, nor want to change anything in their lives. The ['why-don't-you, yes-but'](#) game is an exaggerated example of this tendency. If you sense this happening, stick to being an empathic listener. If you don't have the patience for it, excuse yourself. If you clicked on that link and want to understand transactional analysis in greater depth, there are some very helpful [videos](#) on YouTube.

Summarising



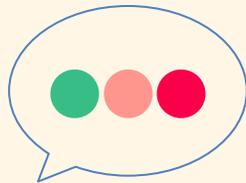
Summarising is action oriented. It pulls together the main points of a discussion and organises them so that they can be confirmed or corrected. It helps to:

- ✓ Prioritise scattered thoughts and feelings
- ✓ Close the discussion on a particular theme
- ✓ Consider ways forward



Example: 'May I check if I've understood? You feel that staying at home is driving you and your family crazy. You think you've exhausted all possibilities of making money in the city and are feeling caged in. Is your need to be supported emotionally? Would you like help looking for work?'

Asking Questions



Ask questions that serve a purpose. This could be to:

- ✓ Seek relevant details
- ✓ Encourage them to elaborate on something
- ✓ Encourage them to clarify their own perspective on the situation. This would be a question that's also partly a summary. For example - 'I hear you being fearful of filing an official sexual harassment complaint because you'd like to keep working there. Can I ask what makes you want to continue in this office?'
- Don't launch an inquisition, the other person shouldn't feel grilled.
- Timing is key. Wait for non-verbal cues that tell you that they're feeling 'empty' or lighter from having talked uninterrupted for a while. Sighing, stretching, looking around the room, and checking their phone are some indicative signs.

Close-ended Questions

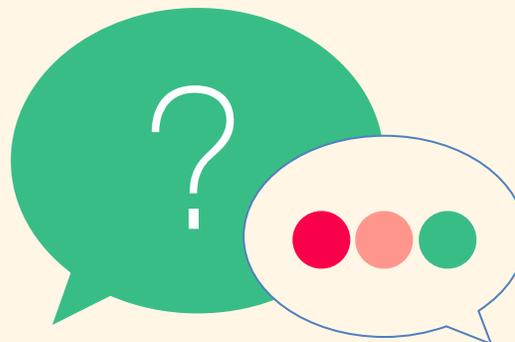
These begin with when, where, who and verbs like do, did, does, can, will, etc. They get one-word or yes-or-no responses that can make it difficult to go on. However, they are helpful to check facts and to ask for clarification. If used appropriately, closed questions can be useful for:



Clarifying	Do you want to do your Master's?
Checking information	It seems to me that... is this correct?
Getting someone to focus on an issue	You mentioned feeling lonely; is that something that bothers you?

Open-ended Questions

These questions encourage people to explore their story. The goal is to use questions that enable the person to have a conversation with themselves in your presence. Suggestions for forming open questions:



To begin discussion use what and how	How was that for you? What can I do to help?
To request description	Tell me about... In what way does...? What do you feel/do/like? What's on your mind? Explain to me...
To give them an opportunity to expand on what is being said	When you say he upsets you, what exactly do you say/do? Could you say more about that?
To focus on feelings	How does that feel? How do you feel about that?
To focus on plans	What will you do...? How will that help you to...? What could you do that might change things? What might be the difficulties in doing...?





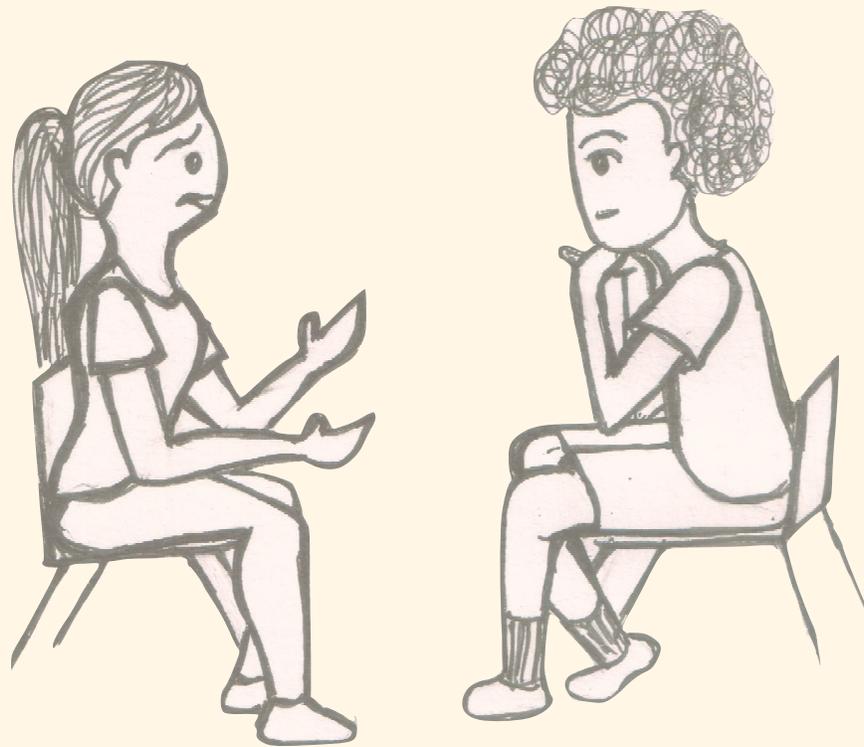
BE CAREFUL WITH

Leading questions	<p>This type of question assumes that the questioner knows the answer, and puts it in the other person's mouth. That's hard for you, isn't it? When will you tell your parents?</p>
Why questions	<p>Some 'why' questions can put people on the defensive. They sound critical, like you're questioning their judgement. Why isn't this working for you? Why do you not understand this?</p> <p>They can also be difficult to answer since they sometimes sound almost philosophical. Such as - 'why are you feeling bored of life?' Try rephrasing a why question as a what question if you can. So, you could try 'what is it about everyday life that bores you?'</p>
Intimate questions	<p>Some questions are not appropriate because they may not be relevant or may be too personal. Avoid being voyeuristic, this is not about getting juicy details. 'Are you gay? And then what did you do in bed?'</p>
Poorly timed questions	<p>Such questions interrupt the flow of a person relating their story. In addition to being inconsiderate, these questions can abruptly end a conversation. How long has this been going on for? (while someone is sharing that they smoke too much pot) Well, what will you do? (asked while someone is still relating the details of their personal crisis)</p>



Okay. You've got your toolkit.
You've read this section and practiced a few times.

YOU'RE READY!



But wait. A friend you are listening to over coffee seems more than unhappy, angry or confused. He seems... off. You've exhausted your toolkit and you've hit a dead end. It's possible that you may be speaking with someone who is mentally ill. It's not you, it's not them. Maybe it's a mental illness.

[Contact me](#) for my **second handout on mental illness.**

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