

Tips on effective communication

Being able to communicate effectively is an important part of our personal and working life. Improving communication skills can reduce your levels of frustration and stress and can facilitate healthy interactions with your friends, family and business associates.

The tips included in this information sheet cover verbal and non-verbal communication methods and practical strategies for communicating with someone who might be experiencing anxiety and/or depression.

Effective communication takes practice. You can use the tips outlined to practice in all of your interactions, whether at work or at home.

Using these tips with your employees, your colleagues, friends and family could help to strengthen those relationships and help you to manage difficult situations and topics more readily.

Verbal and non-verbal communication

What you say is not always as important as how you say it. According to research, in some conversations:

- Words are 7% effective
- Tone of voice is 38% effective
- Non-verbal cues are 55% effective.

Tips for non-verbal communication

Non-verbal cues include things such as facial expressions, eye contact, body posture and movements.

- Make yourself comfortable with the other person.
- Give simple nods of approval.
- Maintain a clearly audible voice.
- Stay alert through long conversations.
- Use an average rate of speech (or a bit slower).
- Be relaxed and attentive.
- Keep gestures smooth and unobtrusive.
- Avoid using feet and legs as a barrier.
- Maintain frequent eye contact.
- Smile when appropriate.

Do	Don't
Keep your communication simple, clear and brief	Give advice unless asked
Ask only one question at a time	Interrupt each other
Stick to the current issue rather than bringing up old issues	Call each other names
Stay calm	Generalise (e.g. 'always' or 'never')
Minimise other distractions (e.g. TV, radio)	Yell or shout
Pay attention to non-verbal behaviour	
Acknowledge that you have heard the other person	
Show empathy or caring for their feelings	
Decide together on regular times for communication	
Focus on the specific behaviour rather than the individual	

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Communication strategies for anxiety and depression

Below are some practical approaches to communicate with someone who experiences symptoms of anxiety and or depression.

- Validate the person's feelings. You may not understand what the person is going through but you can accept that the person is suffering from emotional pain. Do not belittle their feelings or question whether they are real or not.
- Relate to the person - not their symptoms of depression or anxiety. Depression and anxiety are only a part of a person's experience. Separate the symptoms from the person. It is the depression and or anxiety you are angry or frustrated with - not the person.
- Communicate effectively. Show a genuine interest in what the person is saying. Do not interrupt; focus your attention on the person and avoid distractions.
- Show empathy. Empathy is different from sympathy. It shows you are trying to understand, not feel sorry for the person. Empathy shows that you are tuning in to the other person's feelings and experiences.
- Take responsibility for your own feelings. Own your feelings by using 'I' statements. 'I' statements let the person know what effect their behaviour is having on you. 'You' statements only put responsibility for the way you are feeling on the other person - they imply blame.
- Be direct. Discuss and negotiate issues rather than use indirect messages. Ask specifically for what you want. Be specific about your feelings.
- Reflect the person's feelings. When people are distressed, what they say may not be an accurate reflection of how they feel. It is useful to feed back the feelings that are being expressed (as they seem to you), rather than the content.
- Give positive messages. We all thrive on feedback - it helps us to monitor and reflect on our own behaviour. It is especially significant for people with depression and or anxiety as they often lose their confidence in making decisions. The most useful feedback is positive comments. You may need to look for small changes that have been made. Look for signs of effort and praise these.
- Help with decision making. Ask the person what they think their options or choices are. Help them discover any choices they have not thought of. Even doing nothing is a choice. Look for positives in what has already been done. Help the person to reach their own decision. Remember you are giving an important positive message that you believe them to be capable of making decisions and taking responsibility. Respect the decisions made even if you do not agree.
- Clarify how you can help. It is often confusing trying to work out what can be helpful for a person with depression. What is helpful will be different for each person. Check this directly with the person who has depression (when they are feeling reasonably well). Discuss what they would find helpful from you if they start to experience symptoms again or their symptoms worsen in the future.

If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.