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Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

Phone support

What are the differences between phone support and face-to-face visits?

There are several key differences between phone conversation and face-to-face meetings:

- Can't look at documents
- Lack of body language and other visual input
- Possibility of misunderstanding of tone
- Necessary to work harder on the verbal aspects of communication, on tone and speed
- Active Listening – how can it be practised over the phone? Attentiveness, clarification
- Powerlessness – even more powerless over the phone?

How will this change make the person you're supporting feel?

It is important to ensure the person you are visiting still wants emotional support if it will be over the phone. Some people may decide they do not want to continue support or that they would prefer shorter phone calls more frequently, rather than a one-hour phone call once a week.

Setting up the conversation is important, as is explaining why we have to do visits like this for the moment. You may want to use language such as "This is the only way for us to speak at the moment". "I know it's not ideal, but this is the best we can do – is that ok?"

It's good to acknowledge that this is an odd way of doing the visits, for both people. But the most important thing to us all is the health of both people in detention and visitors.

Please talk through how this may change your contact. You may find that an hour is too long for a phone conversation and this becomes more of a 30-minute call once a week, or twice a week. The person you are supporting may still like to have a set time every week. Others may prefer you to call whenever you are free. If you find it helpful to have a set time, do try to find one that works for you both as you would when visiting.

How will this change make you feel and maintaining boundaries

We understand that many of you may not wish to share your phone numbers with people you are visiting. Do remember that you can input 141 before a person's phone number to call them anonymously. Because some people do not answer anonymous numbers, staff in the office are happy to inform the person before your call that you may use a withheld number when calling them.

Boundaries are as important as ever. Be clear that because visits are taking place over the phone, this doesn't mean you can talk for an unlimited amount of time or at any time of day. Manage expectations with this: "I only have 30 minutes" or "I can't talk every day, but let's talk on Friday". "I'm aware that it's nearly 4, when I said I would have to go – is there one last thing you would like to say?"

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You can also check if the person you are speaking to has privacy where they are, if they're comfortable sitting, do they have battery, etc.

There will be other things to consider, which are primarily social questions, and therefore depend on your own social style. For example, the first time you do this by phone, instead of as a visit: what do you say after you've said hello? Do you wait for them to start, or does it need a prompting question?

Managing difficult conversations over the phone

Silences are hard in the visits room, and even harder over the phone. Some visitors reflect on situations of this kind that it reminded them of being with someone very ill – there may be nothing to say, but simply being with them, gently, quietly, can still be a comfort. "I'm still here, and I really care." "I'm with you." "This must be so hard for you." "I'm still here. I'm just going to listen here with you, if you would like me to."

Remember, if someone decides to put the phone down on you, it isn't personal – it is one of the few decisions people in detention can make, and they can express their frustrations at the system to us in a way that may not be possible with anyone else in the vicinity.

Listening techniques can be really useful in managing difficult conversations. Without the assistance of body language, active listening may be even more useful.

Active listening

Really hearing what the person you are supporting is saying – really listening and attending to what they say – is a key skill which we are confident all of our visitors have naturally. Active Listening is paying extra attention to this and being even more aware. The aim of Active Listening is to really hear what the person is saying and working out what it really means. When you are active listening, there is no judgment or evaluation of what the speaker is saying. The best way to do this is to:

- remain quiet, but encourage them when appropriate, with positive words ('yes', 'right', 'I see') and simple questions ('and how did that make you feel?').
- Understand that this is not a formal conversation. Telephone support is an interactive approach that requires identifying the person's underlying issues via his vocal behaviour.
- Try to avoid your problems affecting the support you provide to the person in detention, and ensure that the environment around you when you make the call is calm and quiet.
- Understand that regular self-evaluation after phone calls is important to improve your supporting skills.
- Paraphrase the person's statement using simple language; name and explore his feelings to be empathic.
- Consider how to manage negative feelings that are shared, how to transform them and give them back in a way that is not threatening.

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- Be aware that, as with any relationship, there will be ups and downs, or even no conversation at all. Be natural, authentic and explore the moment by recognising these natural shifts.
- Acknowledge your privilege of being free and recognise the unbalanced power dynamic that may affect the relationship.

As you listen, try to identify key words that might sum up how the person is feeling, words like:

- frightened, or scared
- lonely
- fed up, or 'a bit down'
- pain, or discomfort
- worried.

When the person has finished speaking, reflect back to them what you've understood.

EXAMPLES

To get a feel for Active Listening, read the following three scenarios which show how three different visitors could respond to the same situation that the person they are supporting wants to discuss.

As you read, please think about how they are both feeling and how the visitor's responses affect the relationship between them.

Scenario 1:

Person in detention: (sounding glum) I've had enough of it here, there's nothing to do. It's boring.

Visitor: (said roughly) It's not that bad! Haven't you been to any of the classes here? I thought you said you loved art.

Person in detention: No, I haven't. Besides I don't feel like painting with all of this on my mind.

Visitor: Well, you might as well stay positive. You don't have a choice, you know. You have

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to be here for now. You might as well go to the activities available to you.

Person in detention: (Sounding dejected) I can't take it here.

This visitor seemed dismissive, and didn't want to hear that the person they were visiting was finding being detained hard. The person in detention felt that his visitor wasn't listening to him and might eventually learn not to turn to his visitor for support.

Scenario 2:

Person in detention: (sounding glum) I've had enough of it here, there's nothing to do. It's boring.

Visitor: (overly sentimental) Oh, that's awful. They really should have more to do in here. You are so intelligent, you need to keep busy to keep your bright mind going.

Person in detention: I hate it here, I just can't wait to get out.

Visitor: I'm going to speak to the staff there, they should really be putting on better activities for you all. In fact, I'll give them a call as soon as we come off the phone!

Person in detention: No, don't do that! I'll be fine. I'm going to go to try out the gym soon. Please don't talk to the staff.

This visitor jumped right in with praise for the detainee and a solution to the problem. The visitor seemed unable to tolerate that he might be unhappy. The person in detention didn't want the visitor's intervention and decided he was better off not talking to her. This person probably will not continue to turn to his visitor if he is unhappy in the future.

Scenario 3:

Person in detention: (sounding glum) I've had enough of it here, there's nothing to do. It's boring.

Visitor: You're not happy here because you don't have anything to do.

Person in detention: Yeah. I am bored constantly and all I can think about is what is going to happen to me. And when I do go to the activities some of the detainees don't listen to the staff, it is not productive.

Visitor: It sounds like it bothers you that others are disruptive during the activities.

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Person in detention: They say rude things to me and some other people from my country – they intimidate us. I don't feel comfortable in there. And the staff don't do anything to stop it. They are useless.

Visitor: It sounds to me like you're really angry at those people and feel let down that the staff don't even do anything about it. You would expect the staff to step-in and ask them to leave the room.

Detainee: Yeah. I want them to do something about it.

This visitor did not get angry and they didn't jump in with solutions. Here's what they did that helped the person she was supporting deal with the situation:

- Listened without judging.
- Tuned in to what was said and felt.
- Kept separate from the situation he was describing.
- Was able to tolerate sad, angry, and disappointed feelings.

As a result, the person in detention was able to talk about the situation with the activities in more detail, and the visitor found out what was really bothering him.

This last scenario is an example of how Active Listening can help **empower the person you are supporting by aiding them in gaining clarity about their own feelings** and even in coming to some decisions on their own about how they want to handle a situation.

Necessary Attitudes

It won't always be easy, but it is important to strive to achieve the following attitudes:

- **Accept feelings and perceptions.**
They are real, even if you do not agree with them.
- **Be objective and keep your feelings separate.**
Listen to what is said to intuit what his feelings might be.
- **Allow the other person to be responsible for their own feelings.**
Stay separate from his experience.

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- **Have the necessary time.**
Stop what you are doing to give them your full attention during your weekly phone call.
- **Recognise that feelings are often transitory.**
Often, once a person is able to vent their feelings, they lose their intensity and they are able to move on more quickly. It is said that positive feelings cannot come through until negative feelings come out. After that, they may be more able to focus on solutions.
- **Let the exchange go only as far as they want it to.**
Don't push him to continue to talk after he seems satisfied or wants to stop.
- **Allow the person you are visiting to draw their own conclusions.**
Be patient.
- **Do not have some specific result in mind.**
The real goal of active listening is for the speaker to feel heard and have a safe place to vent and talk, and for the relationship between the speaker and listener to be deepened.

Sometimes, there is not any way to "fix" the situation, but just by listening, the person knows that at least one person in the world cares about him and is on his side.

Sentence Starters for Active Listening

Sometimes you may not know how to begin an Active Listening response, especially when you first begin to use the skill. The following sentence starters can help you phrase your response and also help you decide about what underlying issues may be playing out:

- *"That makes you feel..."*
- *"That could make a person feel..."*
- *"You wish..."*
- *"You would like to change..."*
- *"It hurt you that ..."*
- *"You need permission to..."*
- *"You are looking forward to..."*

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- *“The hard part about this is...”*
- *“You didn’t expect...”*
- *“It bothers you that...”*
- *“You aren’t sure...”*
- *“You’re disappointed that . . . “*
- *“You’re worried/concerned that...”*
- *“You needed/need...”*
- *“When you didn’t get what you needed, then...”*
- *“It seems unfair that...”*
- *“You can’t understand...”*
- *“You think the other person is feeling/ needing/ worrying about/ trying to/ expecting...”*
- *“The tension seems to be coming from...”*
- *“The solution you see is to...”*
- *“The confusion seems to be about...”*
- *“What this seems to mean to you is...”*
- *“What you think might happen because of this is...”*
- *“If things could be different, you’d feel...”*

The office welcomes input from visitors from their new experience of telephone support and we shall update this document from your experiences as and when.

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