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| Summary Notes Talking to Distressed Students |

## Introduction

The motivation for this course is that teachers want to be able to have conversations about mental health but our concerns about doing or saying the wrong thing sometimes act as barriers.

Have you worked with young people with eating disorders before? What were the signs and what support helped them?

## LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND

* Listen with a view to understanding.
* Don't think about giving advice or what we say next, we are just listening and being present in that moment.
* This can be for a short period e.g., a few minutes can make a huge difference.

* A five-minute conversation where they are heard is more powerful than a longer ineffective conversation.
* Try not to assume what is coming next. Don’t fill the gaps. We want to see each case uniquely.
* We cannot assume that we know what they want to talk about.
* Reflect on how you can demonstrate a non-judgemental approach e.g. "There is nothing you could tell me that would make me like you any less…." These phrases help to show that they can talk to you safely.
* Make use of silences… it is awkward but that may give them chance to find the right words or think about what they are feeling so they can convey this to you more easily. Sometimes, in times of distress, it is difficult for young people to get their words out.
* Not jumping in to close the silences will hopefully help them to want to fill the silence themselves.

Think about a time when you really felt heard. What did the listener do that helped you to feel that way? What can you learn from that experience?

## WALK WITH THEM

* This module acknowledges the fact that we can’t always fix a child’s problem, but we can support them and enable them to feel less alone in the moment.
* It’s ok to not fix things. They usually understand this, but you can help them to understand how to cope.
* When you make them feel heard and supported, you are helping them to feel less alone. You are on their team and walk with them.
* Be forgiving to yourself. Just listen to them and demonstrate your compassion. Being no longer on their own can be hugely useful.
* “That sounds really difficult. I’m sorry” is a validating phrase to use to show that you understand that it is hard for them.
* “I am sorry that I can’t change what has happened, but I want to support you” is a way of demonstrating that they aren’t alone anymore.

What can you do for your own self-care after hearing a young person talk about something difficult? Protective factors

## ANYTHING IS BETTER THAN NOTHING

This module considers why we sometimes feel unable to do or say the right thing when a child is struggling and acknowledges that we won’t always say or do the right thing, but that something is better than nothing.

* You might have picked up on something difficult, perhaps some warning signs of a certain mental health need.
* We often think we will make the situation worse; we won’t. The conversation but generate many strong emotions or actions. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have had the conversation.
* They will have lots of big feelings and may not know how they should react. These feelings will be fleeting initially but they will calm down and you can work together to think about what their next steps might be.
* Be forgiving of yourself if they get sad or angry because yes it was difficult, but they now know they are not allowing it.
* You may not always be the best person to work with them or discuss the situation with them. However, we can be curious later at a time when it is appropriate to think about the conversation.
* Either way, you were able to show them that someone in the world cared about them.
* You need to stay calm and help to de-escalate the situation. You might prepare beforehand, think about your breathing, body language etc. You might want to remember statements like, “I will be ready to listen when you are ready to talk.”
* Be confident, be forgiving and reflect later.

What tip can you share with a colleague?

## Talk about the taboos

In this module, we explore how a willingness to talk about the tough stuff can help to build bridges with students who are struggling.

* This requires bravery but work within your limits about what you feel comfortable about.
* Allowing a child to talk about their rituals perhaps around eating disorders or self-harm can help us to build bridges. It can help them to understand that we aren’t repulsed and work towards collective understanding.
* If children can talk about what happens, before, after and their feelings. They will start to be able to find alternatives to their harmful behaviour. They may not always realise until they talk out loud that what they are doing might be dangerous or making someone sad who cares about them.
* The rituals become normalised so having conversations might help to kick start a motivation to change. This doesn’t mean that it is going to be easy but embracing the awkward can be really helpful. Alternatively, if you really don't feel you can talk about it, you can link in with a colleague such as a school nurse.
* A useful phrase to remember during any conversations you might have been, “tell me how it feels when…”

What might help you to feel better equipped to embrace the awkward? Closing thoughts

## SAY THANK YOU

In this module, we consider how hard it is for a student to open up about a difficult topic and why we should acknowledge how hard this must have been and what a privilege it is for us that they have trusted us enough to have this discussion.

* This might be more of a typical conversation for you, but this is their very first time possible when they have been able to brave and honest.
* “Thank you for trusting me,” it shows the conversation matters to you.
* Don't make promises you can't keep. Instead, remind them that you are going to support them through this time.

What will you take away from this course?

## Continue your learning

### Courses

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/mental-health-leads-creating-an-ethos-environment/>

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/support-your-primary-school-pupils-experiencing-mental-health-issues/>

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/descriptions-for-pupil-mental-health-when-to-worry-and-what-to-do-next/>

### Resources

The PSHE Association have some guidance here around activities and how to have conversations with young people:

<https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/news-and-blog/blog-entry/eating-disorders-awareness-week-%E2%80%93-our-advice>

Mentally Healthy Schools’ top tips can be found here:

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/getting-started/how-to-start-a-conversation-with-children-and-young-people-about-mental-health/>

Pooky Knightsmith (2019) The Mentally Healthy Schools Workbook: Practical Tips, Ideas, Action Plans and Worksheets for Making Meaningful Change: Practical Tips, Ideas and Whole-School Strategies for Making Meaningful Change.