

5. Improving family communication

The most common difficult behaviour symptoms families identify are usually connected with communication. It is extremely common for communication within the family to become problematic if your relative, partner or friend is experiencing a mental health problem. Unfortunately, these communication problems can enter a downward spiral with communication becoming increasingly negative and unconstructive.

Good communication helps everyone in the family to feel calmer, more relaxed and in control – and that will help make everyone feel a bit happier. The following section gives information, tips and skills to practice which will help to improve communication in the family. It may be helpful to read the whole chapter to get the general picture, and then take it one step at a time, focusing on just one communication skill at a time. The aim is for you to be able to come back to this section over time as you build your skills gradually.

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“I get so I daren’t say anything – it feels like I’m constantly walking on eggshells”



While mental health professionals are trained to communicate effectively with people with mental health problems, families and friends are often left to their own devices without support and guidance on this important issue.

In order to support someone effectively in their recovery journey it is important to foster good relationships within the family. If communication has broken down, this can be quite a difficult challenge. Trying to turn a negative cycle of communication round can seem quite daunting, but by making small changes over time it is possible to create change. There is hope.

Another important element in supporting recovery is to foster good approaches to solving problems when they arise. We all encounter problems, it is how we cope with them that makes a difference in how they impact on us. Being able to use a practical and pragmatic problem-solving approach is a key skill that has been identified in psychologically resilient people. By encouraging and fostering a problem-solving approach within the whole family, positive communication can be greatly improved. This can help all family members with the added benefit of increasing their resilience.

The stress vulnerability model

The stress vulnerability model is a way to explain why some people experience mental health problems. The basic idea is that we all have some level of 'vulnerability', ie how likely we are to develop mental health problems. People can have very different levels of vulnerability which will impact on how they respond to stress.

One way of thinking about this can be to imagine two buckets, one small and one large.

People who are extremely vulnerable, people who are more likely to experience mental health problems, have a small bucket.

Those who have a low vulnerability are less likely to experience mental health problems. They have a large bucket.

The size of someone's 'bucket' is determined by a mix of different things, such as whether there are mental health problems in the family (genetic factors), and whether someone experienced any kind of trauma when they were growing up like being bullied at school or losing a parent (psychological factors). The size of someone's bucket is also determined by things like having a stable home to live in (social factors), etc.

Everybody has an individual level of vulnerability – their threshold. People can be pushed over their threshold and experience mental health problems when their resources for coping with stress are exhausted.

Now, imagine stress as water filling up the buckets. If a lot of water comes into the bucket, in other words, if a person experiences a great deal of stress – the bucket can overflow if it is

not large enough. This is when mental health problems can develop.

People with big buckets, or a low level of vulnerability, can cope with more stress than people who are highly vulnerable to stress.

What counts as stress can differ from person to person; one person's overwhelming problem could be another's exciting challenge. How the stress is interpreted can also depend on a number of factors, including someone's personal history and their ability to use a practical approach to solving problems.

Your relative may experience stress when they have difficulty understanding what is said or what is being expected of them. It is also stressful if people expect them to do things they are not capable of because they are feeling too unwell. It can also be more stressful when there are a lot of arguments or too much criticism in the household. If everybody in the family is feeling hopeless this can also create a pattern of negative and stressful communication which will be stressful.

Because of this important link with stress and mental health problems it can be very helpful to find ways of reducing stress within the family.

The importance of enhancing family communication

The communication techniques in this section are useful for everyone in the family – including your relative. Good communication enhances relationships between your relative, mental health professionals, and within your family.

Improving communication can reduce stress for people with mental health problems

Reducing stress decreases the chances of a relapse

Eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expression are important nonverbal behaviours that contribute to effective communication

Some mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, affect a person's ability to understand nonverbal communication

Behaviours of individuals affect our relationship with them. We can all benefit from respectful feedback about how our behaviours and actions affect those around us.

Good communication can help to:

- express concerns and worries you may have about your relative in a non-threatening way
- reduce the risk of relapse by creating a positive environment at home

- enhance communication with professionals involved in your relative's care in resolving problems
- clarify what each member of the family can do to help facilitate recovery.

Mental health problems can create additional challenges to communication, especially when the problems affect your relative's ability to think clearly or concentrate. Even at the best of times, it can be difficult to talk about sensitive topics. Sometimes communicating with a relative who has mental health problems can be one of the hardest things we do.

People with mental health problems frequently find it hard to articulate their thoughts and feelings when they are unwell. This can lead to misunderstandings and assumptions about what they are thinking and feeling. It can be very helpful to listen to other people who have been in your relative's situation describing their experiences as this may give you a better idea of the kinds of things your relative may be experiencing. There are written and filmed narratives on the Internet that can be very informative and inspirational, see page 149 for further resources.

The goal of enhancing communication is to provide families with the skills they need to discuss their thoughts, feelings, needs and problems constructively and successfully. This will help to ensure that issues are discussed and that action is taken to resolve problems.

Communication is one of the most frequent activities we engage in on a day-to-day basis. It has been suggested that 75% of our waking time is spent communicating. How often have we all felt at one time or another that we were not as effective as we would have liked in our communications? The more you know about

communication, the better your chances of communicating effectively.

Practice is essential.

You may find that as you read through this section, you are already using the kinds of communication skills discussed in this section. If so, you can be confident you are on the right track.

Developing effective listening skills

Listening is an important part of communicating that is often taken for granted. Listening involves both hearing the message correctly and interpreting it the way it was intended by the speaker.

Listening is an active process – it is not just passively taking information, it involves selectively taking in some information while ignoring other irrelevant background noise. In many of our interactions with others, we are dealing with a host of competing demands for a person's attention.

Being an effective listener also means providing feedback to the speaker either nonverbally eg head nods and facial expressions, or through the use of verbal “*Uh huhs.*” This lets the other person know that you are focusing on what they are saying.

Try to set aside a time each day that is devoted to listening to your relative and find a place to talk where there are no distractions. Try to remember that two important features of listening are:

- Paying attention to the person speaking
- Ensuring that you understand what the person is saying

Some barriers to listening

Communication from others is rarely separated from other sounds in the environment. Listening requires us to be able to separate the communication from the background

noise of our environment. Try to avoid letting distractions interfere with your communication.

Shutting off the television or radio, letting the answering machine pick up when the telephone rings and finding a quiet place to talk all make it easier for us to focus on listening.

Some barriers are internal rather than external. We may bring our own ideas of what we think the speaker will say to the listening situation. We may ignore what the speaker is actually saying by assuming we already know what they will say.

Listening is often an underdeveloped skill.

Test your listening ability in the next conversation you have. As the person speaks, focus on remembering the essential information they are sharing. After they have finished talking, summarise back to them what you heard. Ask the person whether the summary is correct and to clarify any meanings if necessary.

We may be distracted, half listening while we do something else, and half thinking about something else. We may think we're listening, when in truth, we're busy formulating our response back. We may assume we know what the person is going to say and respond back based on our guess rather than on what the person is actually saying. We may interrupt before the person has had a chance to complete their thought.

Verbal and nonverbal feedback greatly enhances communication. Eye contact, alert facial expression, head nods, saying “*Uh-huh*” or “*Yes, I see*” let the speaker know that the listener is paying attention and understands

what they are trying to say.

Asking questions helps to clarify parts that are vague or where more information is needed. They help the speaker know what more they need to say to be clear and complete. Checking out the accuracy of what you've heard by paraphrasing or summarising helps to ensure that you've heard the person correctly. In some communication, this will also involve empathy - checking out the 'feeling' portion of the message.

Paraphrasing is particularly helpful when you are giving or listening to a set of instructions. Having the listener repeat back the instructions not only helps to ensure they heard it correctly but may also help in remembering the instructions.

Suggestions for increasing your ability to listen effectively:

Focus on the message, not the person speaking. This helps to avoid prejudging the message, based on your feelings toward the speaker, who they are, or what you think they are saying.

Focus on their thoughts, not your own thoughts. This helps to prevent you from focusing on your response back to the message.

Attentive listening

Attention may be reduced because of the busy lives we all lead. How many times have you tried to have a conversation with a relative while preparing dinner, watching TV or driving? It's important to make sure that you are giving the other person your undivided attention. Often when we talk to each other,

we don't listen attentively. Below is a 5 step listening skill you can practice.

Skill: Attentive listening

1. Look at the person talking
2. Focus on what they are saying
3. Indicate to the person that you are listening, eg nod your head or say "Uh-huh"
4. Ask clarifying questions if you don't understand. Identify areas where you need more information
5. Check out what you've heard (paraphrase or summarise what the person said).

Lengthy discussion, or the addition of irrelevant issues, can lead to boredom which can reduce our attentiveness to what is being said. If the discussion seems to be going nowhere, it may be better to postpone it until a later time when you are more refreshed, but try to make sure you do get back to it. Also try to stick to one issue at a time.

Indicating to your relative that you are following what they are saying is helpful to facilitating communication. Imagine trying to talk with someone who doesn't look at you, doesn't say anything and shows no expression on their face. How would you know whether your message got across to them? This may be how you find your relative is currently responding, but by using a different approach you are modeling effective listening skills for them to copy.

Attentive listening can help facilitate discussion of a problem or other important family issues. Attentive listening can be enhanced by:

Repeating the message back to confirm it was heard correctly

Reducing noise in the environment eg radio or television, or distractions that take your attention away from listening to your relative

Being aware that physical or mental fatigue can interfere with our ability to listen.

Some qualities of supportive listening are:

- being attentive
- listening with empathy – not trying to solve the problem yourself
- encouraging the person to explore the problem and possible solutions thoroughly – let them talk their way to the solution
- listening to the emotions associated with the problem.

Supportive listening skills

Supportive listening is listening with the purpose of helping the other person. Understanding the message correctly is still important, however, concern with feedback and support is added. It requires the ability to listen and respond empathetically.

Often we are called upon to help another person with a concern or problem they are having. Our main role in this situation is usually to act as a sounding board for that person – to hear them out.

Consider who you go to when you want to talk about a personal problem. What listening skills does that person use? What is it about their listening ability that makes you choose them over others to whom you also feel close?

The goal of supportive listening is to assist the person with the problem or concern, helping them to come up with a possible solution.

Empathy

Empathy is an important quality of our interactions, particularly with those close to us. Being empathetic means being able to put yourself in the shoes of the other person and to appreciate their experience from their perspective or frame of reference. It is the ability to understand, be sensitive to and care about the feelings of the other person.

Empathy doesn't mean you have to agree with what your relative is saying, rather it is letting them know that you appreciate how they feel. Empathy is invaluable in assisting us to communicate effectively. Showing empathy can encourage your relative to open up about their feelings, worries and concerns.

Enhancing communication

Ideal communication, especially when mental health problems are involved, should consist of a number of elements:

- clear communication. This will increase our chance that the message we intend to send is the one that is received
- willingness and ability to listen to concerns and worries of your relatives
- use of language that is understandable and respectful to all persons involved.

Expressing yourself clearly

If you are experiencing mental health problems it can be difficult to focus on what people are saying to you. It is possible to make communication easier to understand if it is simple, precise and clear. The following tips are useful for making clear statements:

- use short statements or questions
- focus on one topic at a time
- be as specific as possible
- avoid using highly negative statements.

Opposite are some examples of ambiguous communications and next to them examples in clearer, more concrete, language with a defined goal to aim for.

Communication is both verbal and nonverbal
When we communicate face to face with another person, we use both spoken words and nonverbal actions to communicate our messages. Although these are often separated as two types of communication, in practice they are intertwined.

Nonverbal actions can work with the spoken words to provide emphasis and additional information not conveyed by the words, communicate emotions and feelings, and to indicate understanding and participation in a conversation.

It is important to be aware of how we use nonverbal communication. In some situations our words may convey one message while nonverbally we are communicating something quite different. For example, a person might say "Oh, that's just great!" while indicating nonverbally they aren't happy by looking out of the window and tapping the table. The

Ambiguous

"I need more independence."

"I wish you'd be more attentive."

"You do a lot around here."

"You are inconsiderate."

Clear goal

"I would like to go out with my friends at the weekend."

"I would like if you would put down what you're doing and listen to me."

"I'm grateful that you do the cooking and look after the children when they come home from school."

"I would like you to clean up after you make a snack."



Basic good communication guidelines:

Turning 'you' into 'I' An easy way of improving your communication skills is to simply think about changing your sentences so that they start with 'I' rather than 'you.' Using 'you' can unintentionally become quite accusing and this will not help your relative's self-esteem. For example,

"You never help with the washing up",

compared with,

"I would like you to help me with the washing up."

Use short, clear direct sentences Long, involved explanations may be difficult to follow as some mental disorders make concentrating difficult. Short, clear, and specific statements are easier to understand and answer.

Keep the content of communication simple and focused Cover only one topic – give only one direction at a time. Otherwise, it can be very confusing for your relative to follow the conversation.

Do what you can to keep the 'stimulation level' as low as possible A loud voice, an insistent manner or making accusations and

criticisms can be very stressful for anyone who has suffered a mental health crisis.

If your relative appears withdrawn and uncommunicative, back off for a while. Your communication will have a better chance of getting the desired response when your relative is more open to talking.

You may have to repeat instructions and directions. You may find that your relative has difficulty remembering what you have said.

Be pleasant and firm. If you make your position clear and do not undermine what you are expressing, your relative will be less likely to misinterpret it.

If the discussion turns into an argument, everyone involved in the discussion should agree to call a 'time-out.' It can be helpful to take a few deep breaths or take a short walk, then go back to the discussion, or wait for another time.

Listen carefully to what your relative tells you. Acknowledge that you appreciate their point of view and understand their feelings.

Good communication is a matter of practice, persistence and using many of the skills you already have.

message we send non-verbally should match what we say.

Also, when listening to others, it's always important to listen to the whole message and to understand the overall communication. For example, a person may say they will do

something, but their lack of enthusiasm is expressed nonverbally. What the person may be telling us is that they are feeling obligated to say yes, but they really don't want to. In this case, we may want to follow-up by exploring the reasons why the person is reluctant.

Confused or unclear talk and misunderstandings

If your relative is not expressing their ideas clearly or the ideas are confusing, try to:

- let them know you are having difficulties and want to understand what they are saying
- ask them to speak more clearly. You can help by asking them to rephrase or to provide more information
- restate what was said so you can check whether you understood the message.

Misunderstandings can occur as a result of jumping to conclusions or misinterpreting what was said. Cognitive difficulties (problems with thinking clearly) that can arise in mental health problems can make understanding difficult.

If a misunderstanding occurs, try to:

- calmly and briefly say what you meant and then either change the subject or walk away
- avoid arguing or discussing the misunderstanding at length
- apologise if your message was unclear
- consider that cognitive difficulties affecting your relative may have led to the misunderstanding
- remember that losing your temper or criticising does not accomplish anything and will likely hurt the person and make the situation worse

Asking 'open-ended' questions

Open-ended questions are questions which do not require a simple 'yes,' or 'no' answer. A closed-ended question is exactly as it sounds like it is – it offers a dead end to the conversation, making it very short and probably preventing much positive change from occurring.

An example of an open-ended question is *"How do you feel about your situation?"* If this were re-framed as a closed-ended question it might be like this: *"Do you feel bad about your situation?"*

From the example of the open-ended question you can see that the person is free to travel in depth into their feelings and describe them to you. If confronted with the closed-ended question, they are likely to just answer 'yes' or 'no' without offering any further insight into the problem at hand.

Open-ended questions can help people discover how they really feel, rather than someone else inadvertently pushing their own words, and so opinions, onto them. The example above inadvertently suggested that the person felt bad about something when this may not have been the case.

Open-ended questioning, however, can give someone space to think in a free-flowing style without being restricted by the ideas of others. It is often during moments of free-flowing thought that people can discover their own answers to their dilemmas that have not consciously appeared to them before. By using questions that remain open you are allowing your relative to freely express themselves without running the risk of being misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Open-ended questions can be started using what? how? and why? Below are some ways of starting an open-ended question:

Tell me about ...

How could ...?

What do you think would happen if ...?

Is there another way to...?

Why do you think...?

How do you find ...?

Formal communication skills

Much of our communication involves trying to get people to understand what we think, feel, or believe about their behaviour and to influence them to behave in certain ways. How messages are 'framed,' or phrased, influences how they are received by other people. Framing includes qualities such as tone of voice and choice of words.

Below are 3 formal communication skills that can be learnt, practiced and shared by the whole family. The 3 skills are:

1. Giving praise
2. Making a positive request
3. Expressing a concern or negative emotion.

Once these skills are being used within the family, it will be possible to start using problem-solving discussions to cope with potential difficulties and conflicts within the family, see page 104.

1. Giving praise - telling people what pleases us

Letting others know that what they do pleases us encourages them to do more of those actions. Praise involves communication of positive feelings for specific good behaviour. We all need compliments about our behaviours that are pleasing, kind or helpful.

People with mental health problems will struggle with their self-esteem. Hearing that one has done well or has pleased another person can help build your self-esteem. Small accomplishments are important, particularly when someone is dealing with

mental health problems. At times of stress and discouragement, this can help someone to keep making efforts, even when progress is very slow.

Skill: Giving praise

1. Look at the person
2. Say exactly what they did that pleased you
3. Tell the person how it made you feel

It is important to be specific about the behaviour that you liked. Vagueness makes it difficult to know exactly what the person did that you found positive. Consider the examples below:

Vague *“I thought what you did yesterday was wonderful.”*

Specific *“Helping the boys with their homework yesterday was very nice of you. It made me proud.”*

Acknowledging a helpful or positive action or attitude has two benefits:

- it lets your relative know that the positive action has been noticed and appreciated
- it makes it more likely that the positive action will be done again.

2. Making a positive request

Sometimes when you ask your relative to do something it may seem that they are not listening to you, or they just don't seem to be taking any notice of you. By using some of the basic communication principles already outlined you can help make your request

clearer and easier to respond to. It is also important that your relative feels able to make requests from you so you know what they would like and why it is important to them.

By asking someone to do something in a positive way, you may be able to avoid expressing something negatively. Fostering positive communications can increase self-esteem and help to change the potentially negative patterns of communication that can develop when someone in the family is experiencing severe mental health problems.

If it is unclear exactly what you want done, your relative may not be sure about exactly what you want them to do, so it is important to be specific. If there is more than one thing being requested it may become confusing and/or overwhelming, it is important that the task is achievable or this may lower their self-esteem. By letting them know how positive you would feel if they carried out the request, you are giving them a good reason for doing what you ask.

Skill: Making a positive request

1. Look at the person
2. Say exactly what you would like them to do
3. Tell the person how it would make you feel if they carried out your request

If your relative doesn't take any notice of your request it is best not to continue as this may turn into an argument. Leave the topic for now, but then repeat your request on another occasion, firmly and politely, so they are aware this is important to you. Do not argue with them about the topic, even if they respond in a negative way.

Expressing positive feelings

Sometimes if patterns of communication within the family have become very negative it can be difficult to think of positive feelings and emotions. In the table to the right are some examples of positive feelings which family members have used and this may be helpful.

I would feel	<p>supported</p> <p>happy</p> <p>valued</p> <p>appreciated</p> <p>grateful</p> <p>relieved</p> <p>listened to</p> <p>as if I count/as if I am here</p> <p>proud of what you have done</p> <p>acknowledged</p> <p>less anxious</p> <p>reassured</p> <p>comforted</p> <p>that I would really benefit from this</p> <p>excited</p> <p>as if we were making some changes</p>
I would feel that you are	<p>more part of the family</p> <p>making progress</p> <p>really moving forward</p> <p>more included</p> <p>showing care for others</p> <p>respecting others feelings</p> <p>looking after you own needs</p>

3. Expressing a concern or a negative feeling

Inevitably, no matter how well people get along together, certain behaviours irritate even the best of us. The constructive expression of negative feelings provides feedback to others about how their behaviour affects us. If we don't express feelings about the behaviour, others will never know their behaviour annoys us. By expressing our feelings in a constructive way, we can avoid bottling up emotions or expressing them in a hurtful or unhelpful way.

Negative feelings can be difficult to express – we may feel it will hurt the person or we fear the reaction of the other person. How

we express our feelings is just as important as the message itself. It is possible to provide constructive feedback about actions that affect us in a negative way.

It is very difficult to change someone's personality, attitudes, or feelings. However, if specific behaviours are identified as desirable or undesirable, it is more likely that the person will be able to work on changing these behaviours. People tend to be more open to changing a behaviour when others express unpleasant feelings about their behaviour, rather than their personality or character.

Focusing on precise behaviours reduces the risk of overgeneralisation, for example:

Overgeneralised *“You’re the most untidy person I’ve ever had to live with.”*

Specific *“I don’t like the way that you cleaned up the kitchen.”*

Skill: Expressing a concern

1. Look at the person
2. Say exactly what is was that concerned you
3. Tell the person how it made you feel
4. Suggest how the person might prevent this from happening in the future, or, suggest a problem-solving discussion

It also avoids threatening or nagging communication which is seldom effective. Threatening or nagging can evoke an angry response which is likely to further reduce the chances the person will change their behaviour. Below are some examples of threatening or nagging messages to try to avoid if possible:

“If you want to continue living here, you’d better get the kitchen cleaned up.”

“When are you going to clean up the kitchen? I’ve asked you over and over again but you still haven’t done it.”

When someone does something that makes you feel sad or angry, let them know in a calm, non-critical way. Do not assume that the other person will guess or that they ‘should’ know how you feel – they may not be able to read your feelings.

People with mental health problems can be particularly sensitive to harsh and critical voice

tones. Tone of voice may put the person on the defensive. They will be less likely to hear what is being said and less likely to try to do what you’re asking.

Communicating concerns or negative feelings works best when they are accompanied by either:

a request for a different behaviour,

Again it is important to be specific about the behaviour you would prefer. Also a request that is phrased politely and includes how much it would be appreciated is more likely to be successful than a demanding or ‘nagging’ way.

Example: *“I find it irritating when you play your music loudly. I would appreciate if you would play your stereo at a lower volume.”*

or, a request for a problem-solving discussion.

Whenever possible, it is often more successful if the problem is resolved jointly. If the other person feels like they have a say in the issue, they are more likely to work at behaving differently.

Example: *“I find it upsetting when you sit at home and watch TV. I’d like to have a discussion about this and see if we can come up with a plan to find other activities for you to do that you enjoy.”*

Problem-solving

If things are working you don't need to make any changes. If something is not working and this is causing conflict and distress in the family, you can use this approach to come up with a joint solution. It is important not to view the solution you decide upon as 'the answer,' since it may not work out as you thought. Think about it as an 'experiment,' it doesn't hurt to try something new and you will learn something from the process – even if you only learn what doesn't work at this time!

Below are the 6 different steps for using a formal problem-solving approach:

Step 1: Identify the problem

Getting a clear definition of the problem is critical to successful resolution. Understanding the specific problem also helps us to know when the problem has been resolved, that is, how things will be different.

It is important to focus on one issue. Too often we let issues build up and then try to solve them all at once. Or sometimes in the course

Problems can be clarified using the active listening skills from earlier in this section:

1. Look at the person, take interest in what they are saying
2. Reduce any distractions and listen carefully to what they say
3. Show or indicate that you are following what they are saying
4. Ask questions if you are unclear what the problem is
5. Check that you have understood by telling the person what you thought they were saying.

of discussing one issue, others arise. Tackle one issue at a time. Avoid getting sidetracked. If other issues arise, you can agree to set aside another time to deal with them.

Once you have identified the problem, turn it into a goal that you are going to aim for. This is important as this process can open up alternative solutions – you are now working together for a positive change rather than complaining about a problem. For example:

The Problem: **Martin makes a lot of noise at night and it is disturbing other members of the family**

The Goal: **For members of the family to be able to sleep undisturbed at night**

Step 2 : Brainstorm solutions

Brainstorming involves coming up with as many alternative solutions as possible. Encourage everyone to use their imagination – no matter how absurd the idea may seem. Ridiculous solutions can sometimes lead to the discovery of a better solution than those that were more obvious at first; they can also inject an element of humour into the process. At this stage, possible solutions are just generated – not discussed. It is helpful to write these down for Step 3.

Step 3: Evaluate the solutions

List all the positive and negative features of each solution. Always start by listing the positives as this approach is designed to be empowering and optimistic. It is important that you carry this stage out quickly. You are not going into detailed discussions about each solution; you just quickly list the positives and the negatives of a solution, then move on to the next one.

You may find it helpful if someone in the family acts as a chairperson to make sure you are following the guidance above (you can take this in turns). This keeps the process moving and stops it from taking too long. It also lessens the chances of things becoming emotionally charged. Remember even bad solutions can have positive features, for example they may be easy to apply but not really solve the problem.

Step 4: Choose the 'best' solution

The goal at this point is to pick a solution, or combination of solutions, that seem the best option for resolving the problem. The solution will be more effective if it is one that is not too difficult to implement. This may mean deciding upon a solution that may not be the 'ideal' one. A workable solution can help everyone get started in solving the problem. Even if it doesn't work, what is learned from it can be helpful if further action is needed. This is likely to be a better course of action than choosing a solution that is almost impossible to achieve.

You may find that a combination of solutions seems to be the best approach. This can work very well if it doesn't become too complicated.

Step 5: Plan

The resolution of a situation often involves taking a number of steps. Working out the details of the plan will help to ensure its success. Does everyone involved know what they need to do? Have you planned any strategies for coping with unexpected difficulties? What will you/I do if...? Once you have the plan and the steps figured out, put it into action!

Step 6: Review

Problem-solving can require a number of attempts. It is important to evaluate the process as you move along. The first attempt to resolve the problem may not succeed – hitches or unexpected difficulties may arise.

Some steps may need to be changed or new ones added. It is important to remember what has been learned and to praise the efforts of those involved. If the solution does not work, ask yourself and those involved the following questions:

- What actions or steps were successful?
- What actions weren't successful?
- What could have been done differently?

Encourage everyone to acknowledge any feelings of disappointment but not to dwell on them, think of it as an experiment that didn't work out as you had anticipated. Focus on what you learnt from it and give praise to everyone for trying to make a change.

Any attempt at making change is a small success. It may help to consider the first few attempts as practices or as steps to resolving the problem. Even partial solutions are useful. Encourage everybody to try again.

The Stages of Change

Families and friends can often become frustrated when the person they support does not seem to want to make any change. The Stages of Change model outlines the different stages people move through when contemplating a change in their behaviour and it can be helpful to have a better understanding of this model.

The idea behind it is that behaviour change does not happen in one step. Instead, the model proposes that a person progresses through different stages on their way to successful change. Each person progresses through the stages at their own individual rate and may go back and forth between stages.

A person's readiness to change their behaviour depends, in part, on what stage they are in. In the early stages, the person may not be ready for change, so expecting a certain behaviour change within a certain period of time will be unrealistic (and perhaps counterproductive) because the person is not ready to change. When someone is not ready to make a change, by trying to push too hard you can unintentionally make the situation worse and lessen the chances of them making any change at all.

The decision to change must come from within the person – stable, long-term change cannot be externally imposed by another person.

Understanding the process of change is important when trying to support your relative make a change in their life.

Changing our behaviour is not an easy task and takes time.

Understanding where your relative is in this process can help you to identify what you can do to assist them.

The six stages of change

1. Precontemplation In this stage, a person has no intention of changing their behavior; they probably haven't even thought about it. They may not see the behaviour as problematic. For example, a teenager may believe that his drinking is just *"having fun with friends."* He may feel his parents are just exaggerating the extent of his drinking.

Your relative may not be fully aware of a problem possibly because they lack information about their behaviour or problem. Raising their awareness may help them to think about the benefits of changing their behaviour and help to move them to the next stage.

Your relative may be heavily invested in the problem behaviour or wanting to be in control. Suggesting choices may be helpful as it enables them to have a say in the situation.

Your relative may believe that they cannot change their behaviour and as a result believe

the situation is hopeless. Try to instill hope that change is possible.

The goal at this stage is not to make your relative change their behaviour but rather to get them thinking about the possibility of change and whether it may benefit them. A non-judgemental attitude helps to lower any defensiveness about the behaviour.

2. Contemplation In this stage, the person recognises that a problem exists and is open to considering action but has not made a commitment to change. The person may wax and wane as they consider the possibility of change. It is important to let them weigh up the positives and negatives as this is an important part of making long-term change. They are open to information, but have not been fully convinced.

Information and incentives to change are important at this stage. Try to discuss with your relative the pros and cons of the behaviour as well as the pros and cons of change. Let them describe this from their perspective. Even when someone isn't willing to change, they may still see some negative aspects of the behaviour.

What can I do?

Express your own concerns directly and the impact it has on you

Avoid blaming and 'guilt-tripping'

Ask if your relative has any concerns themselves about the behaviour

Understanding what they see as the positive aspects of the behaviour will help in identifying barriers to change. Ask about previous attempts to change. Look at these in terms of 'some successes' rather than 'some failures.' You can offer additional options if your relative is interested.

What can I do?

Encourage them to talk about change without pressuring

Explore how their lives might be better with change

Ask non-judgmental questions to them consider the possible problems related to the behaviour

Help them to identify a goal that has meaning for them

3. Preparation At this stage the person has decided to take some action and may have already taken steps in that direction. As a person moves through this stage, they work towards a serious attempt at changing. Their ambivalence is decreasing, they see more pros to making the change, although cons are still being weighed.

Help your relative to build an action plan when they are ready and look at ways to remove any barriers. Figuring out a way to evaluate the success of the plan is also important.

What can I do?

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of making change

Help the person to make plans for how to respond to lapses or setbacks once change has been made

Keep motivation high by talking about how the change will improve their life

Provide lots of support for talk about efforts to change

Problem-solve together how to handle difficult situations

Remind them of their reasons for change

4. Action In this stage the person is aware of the problem and actively works towards modifying their behaviour or life to overcome the problem. Change usually requires sustained effort.

Acknowledge the successes and your relative's commitment to change. Frame any changes as being the result of their own actions, rather than being externally imposed.

What can I do?

Support your relative by helping them evaluate their change plan – is it working?

Help them to identify any difficulties

Help plan for managing any problems

Ask what others can do to help

Praise them and acknowledge it may be difficult for them

Remind them of their goal

5. Maintenance In this stage, the person has developed a new pattern of behaviour which is becoming more firmly established. The possibility of slipping back into the old behaviour is becoming less and less.

Reassure your relative that they can maintain the change. Assist in developing a plan for when they are feeling worried they will slip. If a slip occurs, encourage your relative not to give up. Change often involves multiple attempts, and slips are normal.

Attempt to slow the process down and explore what did work and what didn't work. It is important to praise your relative for their efforts and commitment to making the change.

6. Relapse In order to make a change in behaviour someone may need to go through this cycle several times. Changing a behaviour can be very difficult and often takes some time. You can support longer term, more permanent change, by helping your relative to view a relapse as a normal part of the process in making a permanent change. The important thing they can gain from a relapse is to identify what they learnt from it. What happened, at which point, that could be planned for differently next time?

What can I do?

Praise them for their accomplishments in making change

Focus on other important life areas

Continue to help them handle difficult situations, if needed

What can I do?

Encourage them to view the relapse as a learning opportunity

Help them think how they could behave differently when they try again

Reinforce your belief to them that they can make a change and relapse is a normal part of the process

Motivating your relative to make a change

Below are four basic principles that apply to motivating change in a person.

Express empathy When talking with your relative, try to listen to what they say without making judgment. Accept their point of view and let them know it is normal to have mixed feelings about wanting to make a change.

Avoid argument All of us want to want to be able to have a say in how we behave. The more someone tells us how things are or what to do, the more defensive we may become. Instead of taking an authoritarian approach, such as saying “*You need to...*,” it is more helpful to focus on the negative consequences of continuing to engage in the behaviour and begin to devalue the positive aspects of the undesired behaviour.

The goal here is for them to begin to see the benefits of change and develop arguments to support moving toward the desired behaviour.

Roll with resistance It’s OK to offer new ideas but they may be rejected or resisted by your relative. You can offer but do not try to force them on your relative, as this can increase their resistance to change. Reinforce any positive steps they are already taking – even small steps are important. Your relative may be ambivalent ie have mixed feelings, about making a change. This is a normal part of the change process. Help your relative to explore these feelings as they often contain the most important seeds of lasting change.

Support self-efficacy Have confidence in their ability to make the change. People are more motivated to change when they believe they have the ability, confidence and capacity to make the change. Encourage your relative

and let them know you believe in their ability. Reinforce thinking confidently about making what is likely to be a very difficult change. Unless they believe they will be successful, they are unlikely to continue working on their problems.

Timing

Learning the right time to communicate with your relative can be an important tool in helping to improve effective communication. Below, a carer shares the journey she took in learning the importance of timing in having effective conversations with her son.

Stage 1

I wanted to talk to my son because I could see he was in trouble. He didn't want to talk to me. I would still try to talk to him because I believed it was important.

Result: **Big rows and no communication.**

What I learnt: **I accepted that I could not make him talk to me – however much I wanted to – so I would have wait for him to come and talk to me.**

Stage 2

I waited until my son wanted to talk to me. I was so desperate for communication I would always respond immediately if he wanted to talk however bad the timing was for me, for example when I came in exhausted from work.

Result: **We would start off all right and could manage limited communication but then things would deteriorate quite rapidly as I was too tired or too busy to communicate properly. We had big rows again and still no real communication.**

What I learnt: **I realised that it was better not to talk to him if I was overstretched even though I was desperate for the communication. I needed to reassure him that I did want to talk to him, but it just wasn't the right time as I was too busy/ tired, etc. I would ask if we could talk again the next day or another time that was good for him and me.**

Stage 3

I would sit at my kitchen table drinking tea/ reading the newspaper and this became a nonverbal sign that it was a good time to talk to me. My son could then choose when to approach me when he too wanted to talk and it would then be a good time for both of us.

Result: **We would have good communication for a short while, but, by then I was so desperate to talk about all of the things I wanted to talk about – I had a huge list – after two topics it broke down again.**

What I learnt: **Focus on one or two things to talk about – maximum. Mentally prepare the two most important things for when the time is right.**

Stage 4

I would sit at my kitchen table drinking tea/ reading the newspaper and this became a nonverbal sign that it was a good time to talk to me. My son could then choose when to approach me and it would be a good time for both of us. I would wait to see if he wanted to talk to me about something first. I knew the one or two most important things I wanted to discuss and if there was time we would talk about those. I would not raise any other issues in that conversation.

Result: We managed to have conversations and they ended well. If they started to show any signs of becoming too difficult – I would suggest talking about it another time. Our conversations then started to become much more frequent.

What I learnt: By following this approach we managed to break the cycle of nearly all our talks ending in a row and we were starting to communicate properly for the first time since he started having problems. Even though it was a lot more effort – it was really worth it.

Quiz: Communication Skills

For each of the skills in the table overleaf, assess your strengths by giving yourself a rating between 1 (low) and 5 (high). You can use the results to choose which skills you would like to start focusing on first.

Try working on just 1 or 2 skills at a time rather than trying to do a lot at once.

- 1 - Never
- 2 - Rarely
- 3 - Sometimes
- 4 - Usually
- 5 - Always

Skill	Score
I am a good listener and seldom miss what others are saying to me	
I am easily able to read others' nonverbal communication	
I can usually manage conflicts with other people without too much difficulty	
I am usually able to find the appropriate words for expressing myself clearly	
I check with the other person to see if they have understood me correctly	
I share my personal thoughts and experiences when it's appropriate	
When I am wrong, I am not afraid to admit it	
I find it easy to give compliments to others	
I tend to 'pick up' on how people are feeling	
I generally try to put effort into understanding the other person's point of view	
I make an effort to not let my negative emotions get in the way of a meaningful conversation	
I am comfortable expressing my opinions	
I make an effort to compliment others when they do something that pleases me	
When I have the impression that I might have harmed someone's feelings, I apologise	
I try not to become defensive when I am being criticised	
I check with others to ensure I have been understood	
When uncomfortable about speaking to someone, I speak directly rather than using hints	
I try not to interrupt when someone else is speaking	
I show interest in what people are saying through my comments and facial expressions	
When I don't understand a question or idea, I ask for additional explanation	
It bothers me when a person pretends to listen when in fact they are not really listening	
I try not to jump to conclusions before a person has finished speaking and make an effort to listen to the rest of what they have to say	
I look directly at people when they are speaking	
I listen with disciplined concentration, not letting my thoughts wander when others are speaking	
I do not find it difficult to ask people to do things for me	
I express my opinions directly but not forcefully	
I am able to speak up for myself	
I try not to interpret what someone else is saying but rather ask questions that help clarify	