HOW TO BE A GOOD LISTENER

If you notice a change in someone’s behaviour, it may be a sign they are struggling with their mental health. If a person you know suddenly becomes anxious, irritable, talks negatively about themselves or starts acting recklessly, is tearful or doesn’t want to do things they usually enjoy, these could all be signs they may not be OK.

When someone you know is struggling to cope, it can be worrying. But talking about how they’re feeling and listening to what’s going on can be an important step to them getting the help and support they need.

Opening up can be really difficult for both the person struggling, as well as the person who may be hearing about their struggles for the first time. To help, we’ve created a list of tips on how to be a good listener, based on what young people have told us works for them.

1. START A CONVERSATION

It can be really hard to know how to start a conversation with someone who seems to be going through a tough time. You could begin by talking about something you’re both interested in or just give it a go by asking a few questions about how they are feeling. Just being there for someone can make a huge difference.

YoungMinds Activists said:

“My mum approached me and casually mentioned that it seemed like I wasn’t myself. I don’t think I’d realised until she said this how unwell I’d become. This casual chat evolved into a big conversation where I opened up completely and talked about everything I was feeling.”

“I find the easiest way to open up is if someone asks me how I am doing. People might just want to rant about how they’re feeling and you can help by listening or other times they might want advice.”

2. BE PATIENT

Sometimes, the other person may not be ready to open up. It can be incredibly difficult for them, so don’t take it personally. Don’t give up, either – it may take a while before you’re able to get through to them. If they really don’t want to talk to you, you can try to direct them to someone who may be able to help like a teacher, a professional, or a helpline.

YoungMinds Activists said:

“Even if they don’t want to talk, don’t give up on that person. Try to find another time to do it.”

“Sometimes all you need to do is show a friend you’re there. I realised a friend was going through a bad breakup so I reached out and asked them if they wanted a drink. He ended up talking for hours and he now feels a lot more comfortable to talk about his feelings.”

“Everyone has ups and downs, it’s about having someone who is open and perseveres so you know that they are there.”
3. GIVE YOUR FULL ATTENTION

If they’re ready to talk, give them your full attention. Focus on the other person, hear them out, and allow them to speak without judgement or interruption. Try not to look at your phone while they’re talking and be open minded to what they have to say.

YoungMinds Activists said:

“Give them time to talk. It may have been hard for them to start talking, and they’ve started the conversation because they want to either get something off their chest or are reaching out for help, shutting them down will only make them feel worse.”

“Give them your full attention to show that you are listening. It can help to do it where they feel comfortable like their house or in a park.”

“Be an active listener - give them space to talk, but interact by asking questions to show you’re interested and that you care.”

4. LISTENING IS ENOUGH

Sometimes people aren’t searching for advice. Don’t try to be a professional - you’re not a therapist and you don’t need all the answers. Although you may worry about saying the wrong thing, know that you don’t need to have the perfect response. All you need is to listen and make the other person feel heard.

YoungMinds Activists said:

“I have been a shoulder to cry on for my friends and family. Creating a non-judgemental, safe and trusting space helps them open up and talk to you in confidence. Sometimes people just need someone to listen and reassure them.”

“Advice is always well-meaning, but sometimes people just want to talk about their problems and have someone listen to them. However, if they ask for advice, try your best to be positive to help them feel reassured.”

5. LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Keep in mind that you might not always be in the best place yourself to be a listener. There are many other ways that you can help someone who might be struggling. Urge them to talk to someone they trust like a teacher or professional, find support online or contact a helpline.

YoungMinds Activists said:

“Make sure you’re in the right mind set to listen.”

“Empathy is important - relating to the person you are with will help them feel less alone. But always remember to look after yourself as well.”

“You don’t always need to talk, sometime it’s just good company. It can be enough to know someone is there.”

If you’re struggling with your mental health, it’s important to know that help is out there. Speak to a friend, a parent, teacher or helpline. If you’re a young person in crisis, you can use our Crisis Messenger service by texting YM to 85258.

For more information about mental health, finding help, and looking after yourself, visit youngminds.org.uk/find-help