

# Caring for yourself.

**Self-help for families and friends supporting people with mental health problems.**



# Caring for Yourself contents

*Caring for Yourself* is a self-help workbook for family and friends supporting people with mental health problems.

It is in eight parts. Each covers a different topic:

**Booklet 1** Introduction

**Booklet 2** Being a carer

**Booklet 3** Information

**Booklet 4** Communication skills

**Booklet 5** Problem solving and goal achievement

**Booklet 6** Relapse management and staying well

**Booklet 7** Recovery and hope

**Booklet 8** Taking care of yourself

## Quick guide icons

Throughout *Caring for Yourself*, you will see these picture icons to illustrate different sections.



**Question /  
To think about**



**Stories /  
case studies**



**Exercise**



**Action /  
things to do**



**Information  
and resources**

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# Introduction to Caring for Yourself

Rethink Mental Illness and the Meriden Family Programme have created *Caring for Yourself* to help people with mental health problems and carers, family and friends. It is for you if you support someone with any mental health condition. You may have a relative struggling with anxiety, depression or bipolar disorder, a friend with psychosis, schizophrenia or a personality disorder. Whatever the diagnosis, *Caring for Yourself* can help you to develop skills and new ways to cope.

## You can use *Caring for Yourself* in two ways:

- Use it yourself independently.
- Use it as part of other training programmes for carers such as the Rethink Mental Illness 'Caring and Coping Programme' or the Meriden Family Programme's 'Caring for Carers' training.

Whichever way is best for you, you can work through it at your own pace, in your own time. Start with Booklet 1, then plan how to use the other booklets and in which order you want to use them.

Everything in *Caring for Yourself* comes from the experiences of others who have cared for people with mental illness or from professionals. There are exercises and activities to help you develop skills to help you cope with your situation, whatever that is.

## You will find information about:

- Being in a caring role.
- Taking care of yourself.
- Getting your own life back.
- Finding information about what your relative or friend is going through.
- Dealing with problems.
- Talking about what is going on.
- Supporting your relative or friend.

We hope the exercises and activities will help people who cannot attend training courses or support groups. If it helps you, please get in touch. We want to know how we can help more people who are supporting a relative or friend with a mental health problem.



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Rethink Mental Illness

# Booklet 4: Communication skills

Good communication is something that we can sometimes take for granted. However, at times of stress and challenge, things can get in the way of communicating well with others. This booklet looks at some of the things that can make communication more difficult. It then goes on to introduce some specific communication skills that can be helpful in building good relationships.

# Introduction



Before starting this booklet, take a moment to think about how you and your family and friends communicate. It might help to consider some of the following questions:

**What happens to communication when things are stressful?**

**How did you communicate before your relative or friend developed mental health difficulties? How have things changed since then?**

**What is communication like when things are going well?**

**What do you like about how you communicate?**

**What are you less comfortable with?**

**Do you have any concerns about the way you communicate?**

Communicating well can be difficult at times – and that's before mental health problems enter your family. There are everyday stresses and hassles to deal with and these can lead to people snapping at each other. People may argue with raised voices or focus only on the difficult things that are happening. It might be that someone gets so distressed that this gets in the way of talking and certain things are not discussed at all.



**Think about how you communicate when you are:**

- **Stressed?**
- **Angry?**
- **Tired?**
- **Upset?**

Stress of any kind can make it more difficult to communicate in a clear and positive way. This can be particularly so for families affected by mental health problems. Sometimes challenges may be in communicating with each other, sometimes with mental health services.

The good news is that effective communication skills can reduce your stress and may improve the mental health issues of the person you are caring for. It can also make it easier to solve problems and achieve goals (see Booklet 5). It may also be helpful to think about how to use these skills when talking with mental health professionals. This booklet looks at four helpful communication skills:

- Noticing the positives.
- Asking for what you want.
- Active listening.
- Saying more difficult things.

**Just looking at the headings, you might already begin to think about what might be most helpful for your immediate needs.**



## 4.2 How to use these sections

There are three stages to developing each of the communication skills – **reading** about it, **practicing** it and **reviewing** it on your own or with the help of others.

### Stage 1 – Read

Each skill is described in detail. Firstly, though, you will be asked to think about why the skill might be important. It is then briefly introduced before taking you through the steps involved.

### Step 2 – Practise

Practicing each of the skills is really important as change doesn't always happen overnight. Making a change usually takes:

#### **Practise**

#### **Perseverance**

#### **Patience**

- Practice one new skill at a time and stick with it until you feel comfortable and confident. You can then think about moving onto the next skill.
- Following the steps as described may feel strange and close friends and family may notice that you are doing some things differently. If you feel comfortable doing so, it may be helpful to explain a bit about what you are doing.

### Step 3 – Review

It may be helpful to think about how you might check out your progress as you work through the skills. You might want to:

- Write out what you would do or say, rehearse it, then check against the steps outlined in each section.
- Find some way of recording what you are doing e.g. tape recorder, phone, computer, MP3 player.
- Do this section with someone else so you can watch each other.

#### **Can you think of other ways of practising that will allow you to check back over what you have done?**

When reviewing what you have done, remember, it's important to first notice what you've done well. Then you can think about what, if any, improvements you might like to make.



## 4.3 Some things to consider

When working through these sections, do bear in mind that it can take time to change the way you communicate. After all, you, your family and friends may have got into the habit of focusing on certain issues and talking about them in a certain way. Some common fears about learning new communication skills are:

- It will feel odd.
- It will be difficult.
- It will be embarrassing.
- It will make the situation worse, or people will not respond in a positive way.

### **It may be helpful to think about the following:**

It will feel odd when doing something for the first time. The only way for it not to feel strange is to keep doing it. Remember when you first learnt to drive or to ride a bicycle?

- Practise the skills in situations where you feel comfortable e.g.
  - with a stranger who you will never see again.
  - a friend or family member who is supportive.
- Practise initially with a neutral topic, not something that's touchy or a difficult subject. Remember – small steps!
- Focus first on the skills with a more positive focus – 'Noticing the positives' and 'Active Listening'.
- You cannot be responsible for the responses or actions of others. But you can feel more positive about how you dealt with the situation and how you communicated your own thoughts and wishes.

This section has talked about how communication can be strained at times and has briefly explained how improving communication can be helpful. Remember, don't try to do too much at once. Think about what is important for you and your family, and take your time. It is probably best if you break up doing these different communication skills into different sessions.

The next section describes how important it is to notice and comment upon the positive things and outlines a way of doing so. While you can decide in which order you would like to cover these skills, it is always good to start with the positive.

## 4.4 Noticing the positives

Have you noticed how sometimes the annoying or unpleasant things in life take your attention more easily than the things that please you? It can be easy to overlook the positive things that people do, or if you notice them, it can be easy to forget to say something. It is often the little, everyday things that get missed; for example, a son helping with the gardening; a daughter getting up in good time for school or work; a partner doing the washing up; a friend taking the time to talk over a cup of tea.

### Why is it important to notice the positives?

**How would it be helpful if you were able to notice and comment when someone does something that pleases you? List as many advantages as you can.**



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Did you manage to list a few? There are quite a few advantages to telling people about the things they do that please you.

- It feels good – for you and the person you are talking to.
- If you are feeling low or down, it may lift your mood a little.
- It helps encourage people to keep trying when things are difficult.
- It improves the mood in the family or amongst friends.
- It creates an environment where people are more able to work together to solve problems.

### What are you doing already?

Think about what you do already in terms of noticing the positives. When was the last time you noticed someone doing something that pleased you and you told them?

**What were they doing?**

**How did you feel?**

**What did you say?**

If you can't think of an example, maybe think of a situation where you could have said something positive, but didn't for some reason.



## How to... notice the positives

### There are three steps to this skill:

1. Gain the person's full attention.
2. Say exactly what they did that pleased you.
3. Tell them how you felt.

### 1. Gain the person's full attention

This is important, as it can show that you mean what you're saying. It also lets the other person know that it is them you are talking to. Gaining someone's attention can be done in a number of ways. Choose an approach that feels comfortable for you and them.

#### You could:

- Say their name.
- Look them in the eye.
- Touch their arm or hand.
- Make sure you're in the same room as them (rather than calling down the stairs!).
- Get on the same level as them (e.g. sit down if they are sitting down).

### 2. Say exactly what they did that pleased you

Describe, as specifically as you can, what they did that pleased you. For example saying "You were great yesterday" may let them know that you are happy about something they did, but would they know exactly what you meant by that? Imagine describing it to someone else who wasn't there: What did that person do or say? When did they do it?

### 3. Tell them how you felt

Usually a feeling can be described in one word. When telling someone how you felt, use words that fit with how you felt in an everyday kind of way. Take a look at the box and think about what words might work for you!

Chuffed

Over the moon

Happy

Proud

Overjoyed

Stoked

On cloud nine

Delighted

Tickled pink

Grateful

Pleased

Thrilled to bits

Enthusiastic

Appreciative

Made up

Glad

### Practise and then review

As discussed at the start of this section, practising a new skill and checking to see how you've done can be really helpful in developing skills. It helps to notice what you've done well and what you might do to improve. Set yourself a goal:

**I will feedback something positive by the end of the week.**



### Sophie

Sophie spent some time thinking about some of the things that she was pleased about during the last week. After doing so, and practising by herself, she said to her brother, Peter, “I really appreciated you taking the dog for a walk on Sunday; it made me feel less stressed, as it was one less thing for me to think about. Thank you”

### Harpreet

Harpreet was pleased to have been involved in preparing meals and said to her mum “Thank you for asking me to help with making dinner yesterday, it felt really good to get involved again”

## Putting ‘noticing the positives’ into practice

It may feel strange at first. After all, it may be the first time you’ve tried doing it this way. Take one step at a time, keep going and check through at the end to see how you did. The more you do it, the more familiar it will become.

**Take some time to think about the last week or so. Try to remember something someone did that was helpful or nice. It may be someone in your family, a friend, or even a stranger. Now, follow the steps as in the above examples:**



**1. How would you gain their attention?**

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**2. What did they do?**

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**3. How did you feel? What words would you use to describe this?**

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**Now practise how you would say this to the person, using the 3 steps of the skill. Now review:**

**What did you like about the way you did that?**

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**What steps did you use?**

- Gain the person's full attention.
- Say exactly what they did that pleased you.
- Tell them how you felt.

**What could you do to improve how you expressed your feelings?**

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This section has explained how helpful it is to notice and comment when someone has done something you liked. Before going on to the next section, try practising this skill as much as you can. You don't need to say something every day, but it's always good to have plenty of practice at noticing the positives!

When using this skill, you find the person you are talking to doesn't agree with you or finds it hard to accept the compliment. This may be more likely to happen if the person you are talking to is experiencing depression. When someone feels very low, it is difficult to see anything positive, especially if it is about them. If this is the case you may find you say something and they reject what you are saying. This may feel difficult for you as you're trying a new skill. Try not to be put off and remember, just as you may need to practise noticing the positives, others may need to practise accepting them!

Use the following table to make a note of how you have got on. Before going on to the next skill you may want to take a break or stay at this point until you feel you're more familiar with noticing the positives.

# Noticing the positives



| Day | Person who pleased you | What exactly did they do that pleased you? | What did you say to them? |
|-----|------------------------|--|---------------------------|
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|     |                        |  |                           |
|     |                        |  |                           |
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## 4.5 Asking for what you want

Have there been times when you found it difficult to ask for something? It may be that you wanted someone to do something to help you out. Or perhaps you wanted them to change something about what they were doing. For example, if a friend of yours was always late, and you were annoyed about this, letting them know you would like them to be on time may lead to the situation changing. Even if it didn't, you would have said something.

### Why is it important to ask for what you want?

**How would it help you if you were able to make requests in a firm, clear and positive way? List as many advantages as you can.**



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There are many advantages to making requests in a clear and constructive way:

- It gives people a clear idea about what you are asking for and why.
- It keeps a respectful and friendly atmosphere.
- It allows the person you are asking to say yes or no, while keeping things calm.
- It may lead to things changing.
- It can resolve a problem before it becomes a really big issue.
- It can help towards achieving goals.
- It is less stressful than nagging, threatening or demanding – for both you and the other person.

### What are you doing already?

Think about the last time you wanted to ask someone for something – but didn't.

**What did you want?**

**How would you have felt if they had done what you asked?**

**When you asked, what would you have said?**

If you were able to think of an example, keep a note of this to use later on in this section. If you weren't able to, think of an example where you did ask for something – what did you say, what did you ask for? How did you feel? Would you change anything about the way you asked for something?

## How to... 'ask for what you want'

### **There are three steps to asking for what you want:**

1. Gain the person's full attention.
2. Say exactly what you would like them to do.
3. Tell them how you would feel if they did it.

### **1. Gain the person's full attention**

As with noticing the positives, this is important and for the same reasons. It shows you're serious about what you are saying and means it is clear that you are talking to a particular person.

#### **As with noticing the positives, you could:**

- Say their name.
- Look them in the eye.
- Touch their arm or hand.
- Be in the same room as them (rather than calling down the stairs!).
- Get on the same level as them (e.g. sit down if they are sitting down).

### **2. Say exactly what you would like them to do**

Describe what you would like the person to do. Use the words and phrases you feel comfortable with but try to follow these guidelines:

#### **Use 'I' instead of 'you'.**

For example: "I would like it if you would put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket" instead of "You should put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket"

#### **Phrase the request positively rather than negatively**

Try to talk about what you would like them to do rather than what you would like to stop. If you were to ask someone to stop doing something, it might not be clear to them what you would like them to do instead. For example: "Stop leaving your shoes in the door way" doesn't tell them where you would like them to leave the shoes. "I would be really pleased if you could put your shoes in the cupboard under the stairs" gives someone a clear idea about what you'd like.

#### **Be specific**

As with the above, if you can be as specific as possible, the person you are asking will have a clearer idea about what they are being asked to do. For example: "I'd be really chuffed if you could help with the garden" may feel a bit overwhelming or tiresome for someone who has no interest in gardening. However, "I'd be dead chuffed if you could mow the lawn next week" gives someone a clear idea about what you are asking for and when you would like it done. They may be willing to do it because it is one specific thing that you are asking.

### 3. Tell them how you would feel if they did it

Think of one or two words that might describe how you'd feel if they were able to do what you were asking. As with noticing the positives, use words that feel natural and comfortable for you.

### Practise and then review

As discussed above, this step can be really helpful in developing skills. It helps to notice what you've done well and see what you might do to improve.



#### Andy

Andy realised it had been a while since he spent some time with his father. After writing it out and going over his request several times, he found a quiet time in the evening to talk to his Dad about it. He put down his mobile phone, and put the TV on mute. He said, "Dad, I'd really appreciate it if we could go for a bike ride on Saturday. We haven't done it for ages and it would make me feel good."



#### Andrea

Andrea noticed that one thing that really irritated her, was the state the bathroom was in after her son, Oliver, had used the shower. Before Oliver started his breakfast, she sat down next to him and said, "Oliver, I would really like it if you could tidy the bathroom after you have used it, it would make me feel much happier."

### Putting 'asking for what you want' into practice

Practising may feel strange at first, or even a bit scary. You may be concerned about whether the person you are asking agrees or not. Try to focus on the skill you are learning (making a request) rather than the outcome. What happens as a result of your request doesn't reflect whether you have done the skill well or not. Quite the opposite in fact! It may be that you have asked in a way that has been clear, understandable and, as a result easy to say no to! What's more important is that you have been able to ask for what you want and have maintained a friendly atmosphere. If the person you have asked has said they are unable to do what you asked it may be helpful to go on to talk about resolving the problem using problem-solving skills (Booklet 5).

If there is something that you find hard to ask, you might wish to talk it through first with a friend or sympathetic person who understands what you are trying to ask. Remember, as with noticing the positives, take one step at a time and keep going and check through at the end to see how you did. The more you do it, the more familiar it will become.



Take some time to think about how things are going at the moment. Is there something you would like to ask a friend or family member to do? Who do you want to ask? Now, follow the steps as in the above examples:

### 1. How would you gain their attention?

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### 2. What do you want them to do?

- Use 'I'.
- Be positive.
- Be specific.

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### 3. How would you feel?

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**Now practise this example using the 3 steps of the skill.**



## Now review

What did you like about the way you did that?

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What steps did you use?

- Gain the person's full attention.**
- Say exactly what would you like them to do:**
  - Did you use 'I'?
  - Were you positive?
  - Were you specific?
- Tell them how you felt.**

What could you do to improve how you made your request?

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This section has suggested a way of asking for what you want in a clear, precise way. Before going on to the next section, make sure you practice this skill. If possible use the skill at least once a week, making small requests for something that you want. You may find it helpful to use the following table to record your progress.

# Asking for what you want



| Day | Person to whom request made | What exactly did you ask? |
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## 4.6 Active listening

Being able to listen effectively is a key communication skill. The active listening described here involves more than just staying quiet. It is different from listening where you hear someone's concerns then give an opinion or advice. Active listening means allowing someone to talk, drawing out the person's point of view and checking out the things you don't understand.

### Why is it important to listen to what is being said?

**How would it help you if you were able listen carefully to what other people are saying? List as many advantages as you can.**



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You may have found that listening benefits the speaker as well as the listener. This may be so, and is the case with all communication skills. Active listening helps:

- You to better understand what is happening for people.
- You to know when others are happy/unhappy and the reason for this.
- The person speaking to feel valued.
- The person speaking to let you know how they are feeling.

### What are you doing already?

**Think about the last time you listened to what someone was saying.**

**How would that person have known you were listening?**

**What were you doing?**

**What were you saying?**

This is a slightly different skill to the others in that you are saying less but you still have to work hard. What you are doing is listening and showing the other person you are really focusing on what they are saying, rather than saying very much yourself.

## How to... listen actively

### There are five steps to active listening.

- Give attention to the person who is speaking.
- Minimise distraction.
- Use little words like 'mm', 'ah ha' or 'okay' to show that you have heard what is being said/encourage the speaker.
- Ask questions.
- Summarise what you have heard.

### 1. Give attention to the person who is speaking

This shows that you are taking what your relative or friend is saying seriously and that you value what they are saying. You could:

- Look towards them.
- Make eye contact if you and they feel comfortable.
- Change your body posture so you are facing the speaker.
- Touch their arm or hand.
- Put down other things – a cup, magazine. Turn off the TV. Focus entirely on them and try to avoid being distracted by other things.
- Be in the same room as them (rather than calling from the room next door).
- Get on the same level as them (e.g. sit down if they are sitting down).

### 2. Minimise distraction

Listening to what is being said will be easier if you do your best to reduce distractions. For example, you might:

- Turn off the TV/radio or switching it to mute.
- Pause the DVD.
- Put your mobile phone down or on silent.
- Close the door if there is noise in the room next door.
- Stop what you are doing.

### 3. Encourage the speaker

Prompts are used to show that you have heard what is being said. It also encourages the speaker to carry on talking. Examples of prompts are saying 'ok', 'mmm', 'uh-huh', 'I see' or nodding your head.

### 4. Ask questions to make sure you understand what they are saying

Questions will help you check out what the other person is saying and will improve your understanding of what is being said. They also show the other person that you are interested in what they are saying.

## 5. Summarise what you have heard

Another way of checking your understanding is to repeat back the key points of what you heard. This also gives the speaker the opportunity to confirm this is what they wanted to get across, or to clarify any misunderstandings. If it is a long or complicated discussion, sometimes people find it helpful to make some notes if everyone is comfortable with that.



### Jamie

Jamie was in the kitchen when he came home from work and wanted to talk about a row he had with his friend, Chris. Jamie noticed that his mother stopped washing the dishes and turned around to face him. While he was talking she nodded and said “I see” a couple of times. At one point she asked him a question to check out that he was still talking about Chris and not someone else. At the end she said, “It sounds like you’ve had a really rough time. Chris accused you of saying something behind his back, which wasn’t true and it took a while to sort it out. But you’ve cleared the air now and you’re still going to football on Saturday. Have I got that right?”

## Putting ‘active listening’ into practice

This may seem like a difficult skill to practice and then review, as you are saying less than in the other skills. If you feel comfortable sharing this with someone, it can be helpful to ask them to talk to you about something so you can have a practise using the skills. Don’t worry about the topic of conversation – it’s more about the opportunity to have a go!



Before you practise this skill, take some time to think about how you might show someone you are listening to them.

### 1. Give attention to the person speaking

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### 2. Minimise distraction

**What things do you find distracting?**

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**What might you do about this?**

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### **3. Encouraging the speaker**

**What 'prompts' would you feel comfortable using?**

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### **4. Ask questions to make sure you understand what they are saying**

### **5. Summarise what you heard**

**Practice. Now review:**

**What did you like about the way you listened?**

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**What steps were you able to use?**

- Give attention to the person who is speaking.
- Minimise distraction.
- Encourage the speaker.
- Ask questions.
- Summarise what you have heard.

**What could you do to improve your listening skills?**

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# Active listening



| Day | Who were you listening to? | How did you show you were giving them attention? | What encouragement/prompts did you use? | What questions did you ask? | What did you understand? |
|-----|----------------------------|--|---|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
|     |                            |  |   |                             |                          |
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## 4.7 Expressing difficult feelings

Feelings like anger, sadness, frustration, fear and disappointment are unpleasant to experience. They are uncomfortable and are often associated with difficult events in our lives. These feelings are not wrong, or damaging, but what we do or say when we are experiencing them can sometimes cause problems. For example, people may avoid talking about something that is making them angry for fear of causing others to be upset or offended, or adding to their worries.

Carers often say they are reluctant to express more difficult feelings because they are afraid they might cause the person they are caring for to relapse. However, these feelings don't go away and if they remain unexpressed may lead to them being expressed in less helpful ways at a later date e.g. shouting, slamming doors, withdrawing from friends and family.



**What difficult feelings do you experience? Write some of these below:**

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**Why is it important to express difficult feelings?**

**How would it help you if you were able to express difficult feelings soon after they happened? List as many advantages as you can.**

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It's not easy to think about difficult feelings and even harder to think about how expressing them might help a situation. However, there are a number of advantages to telling someone that you are upset or unhappy about something:

- Being clear and direct about how you feel about a specific situation tends to reduce the chances of the situation becoming more difficult in the long run.
- It stops feelings building up inside and causing more stress.
- It helps identify difficult situations or problems and can increase the chances of them being resolved.



## What are you doing already?

**Think about a recent time when you felt upset or cross but found it difficult to say what you were feeling to the person involved.**

**What were they doing?**

**How did you feel?**

**Were you able to say anything? If so, what did you say?**

It may be that you were able to find plenty of examples where you have felt something unpleasant and have wanted to say, or have said, something to the other person involved. Before going on to the next section, it may be helpful to bear in mind the following guidelines:

- Remember – small steps! It is helpful at this stage to avoid issues that may cause major confrontation until you feel more confident using the skill.
- Try to focus on the 'structure' of this skill rather than the content of what you are saying.
- Consider your timing. If you are very angry or upset it may be helpful to allow yourself some time to calm down before expressing your difficult feelings. It may also be wise to choose a moment when the person you are talking to may be more able to listen to what you are saying. For example, pouncing on someone when they come in after a hard day's work, or when they are grumpy because they are tired and have just woken up, may not be the best time to bring up a more difficult subject.

## How to... express difficult feelings

**There are four steps to this skill:**

- Gain the person's full attention.
- Say exactly what they did that you found upsetting.
- Tell them how you felt. Do something to try to resolve the issue e.g.
- Make a request of the person, suggest having a problem-solving discussion about the issue (Booklet 5).

### 1. Gain the person's full attention

As with the other skills, this is key in letting the other person know that it is them you are talking to. It may also help them focus on what you are saying.

**What could you do to get their full attention? List these overleaf.**

**For ideas, look at the previous skills of noticing the positives and making requests.**



## 2. Say exactly what they did that upset you

### **Be specific**

When describing what it is that you disliked, imagine describing it to someone else who wasn't there: What did that person do or say? When did they do it?

Describe exactly what they did that upset you. Name a particular behaviour that concerns you, rather than being very general. So for example, rather than saying "You're so inconsiderate", which is a general statement about a person, saying "I am cross because you are playing your music too loud" may reduce the chances of the discussion becoming personal.

### **ONE issue at a time**

Try to avoid listing a series of flaws or issues and stick to describing and resolving one issue at a time.

### **Use 'I' instead of 'You'**

As with previous skills, use 'I' instead of 'You'. For example, saying "You made me angry because you were late for dinner" is likely to make the person feel attacked and lead to them feeling defensive and/or angry. You could say something like "I was angry and disappointed because I understood you would be home for dinner, and had been looking forward to us eating and chatting". This shows that you are 'owning' your feeling, but being clear about the behaviour that has led to you feeling that way.

## 3. Tell them how you felt

As with positive or pleasant feelings, difficult feelings can be described in one word for example: annoyed, cross, angry, disappointed, frustrated, frightened, worried. When telling someone how you felt, use the language you feel most comfortable with.

## 4. Do something to try to resolve the issue

Sometimes it may be sufficient to just say what is concerning you, but often it is helpful to suggest alternatives. You may want to make a request of your friend or relative, so that things could be different next time around. Suggesting you meet up to problem-solve the situation may also be helpful (see Booklet 5).

## Practise and then review

The next step is to practise this skill. As discussed earlier in this booklet, it may be helpful to focus on minor irritations rather than big issues to begin with. Once you've had a try, think about what you've done well by checking what you've done against the steps. Then consider any areas that you might want to improve upon.



### Matthew

Matthew easily identified something that bothered him. He found it difficult when his partner, Katie was late in from work. Rather than address it one evening when Katie had been late, he waited until he'd calmed down. That weekend he said "I get really frustrated when you come home late. In future, if you're going to be late, I would feel much better if you phoned to let me know."



### Nora

Nora had noticed that her daughter, Mary, was taking less care of herself. She told Mary, "I'm really concerned about how you don't seem to be using the shower as much as you normally do. It bothers me and I would feel much better if you were to have a shower every day like you used to do."



## Putting 'expressing difficult feelings' into practice

Take some time to think about the last few days. Try to remember a time when you were upset or annoyed by something that someone had done. It may be someone in your family, a friend, or even a stranger. Now, follow the steps as in the above examples:

### 1. How would you gain their attention?

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### 2. What did they do?

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### 3. How did you feel? What words would you use to describe this?

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### 4. How do you want things to be different?

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**Practise. Now review:**



Now practice how you would express that difficult feeling, using the 4 steps of the skill. Now review.

**What did you like about the way you did that?**

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**What steps did you use?**

- Gained the person's full attention.
- Said exactly what they did that upset you.
- Told them how you felt.
- Did something to try to resolve the issue that led you to having these feelings.

**What could you do to improve how you expressed your feelings?**

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This booklet has outlined a way of expressing difficult feelings in a clear, direct manner. Before going on to the next section, try practising expressing difficult feelings whenever you get the opportunity. Use the table on the next page to keep a note on how you are doing – this may help in reminding you just how well you have been doing.

# Expressing difficult feelings



| Day | Person involved | What exactly did they do? | How did you feel? | What did you ask them to do in future? |
|-----|-----------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--|
|     |                 |                           |                   |  |
|     |                 |                           |                   |  |
|     |                 |                           |                   |  |
|     |                 |                           |                   |  |
|     |                 |                           |                   |  |

## 4.8 Communicating when someone is unwell or stressed

Coping with mental health problems can be difficult both for the person experiencing them and for those they are close to. At times, your relative or friend may be very unwell, or you may be going through a difficult time, finding it all too much and too painful to talk or to have lengthy discussions. This is natural, and you will get through these difficult times. Given what this booklet has been about, you may just need to give some time to thinking about when you raise certain issues. Timing is important – if someone is very upset or low, it's not the time to point out very difficult things to them.

Similarly, if someone is wound up or even aggressive, it is not the best time to raise issues – it is probably best to wait for a calmer time. Another important factor is that some people who experience mental health problems can have experiences which interfere with communication. Examples are being exhausted through lack of sleep, feeling anxious about the future, embarrassed about some of their actions, hearing voices saying unpleasant things to them, or believing that people may be trying to harm them. It is important to be aware of these and sensitive to them.

### **Ask yourself:**

**Do I need to talk about this right now?**

**Is this a good time for me to raise this issue?**

**What is the other person feeling just now?**

Remember, there is always another day, and it's probably better to wait for a time when the other person is more receptive, and when you feel that it is also a good time for you. Other common issues can be that the other person doesn't want to engage in discussions or conversation. Once again, remember that as with learning anything new, all of this takes time. Be patient and persevere. The same applies if you get a negative reaction initially. It may be new for the person and they need time to think about it and take it in.

There may be other strategies that might be helpful, e.g. the person may not do something for you but may be willing to if they realise the impact it has on others. If you find talking with professionals difficult, you don't have to do it alone – bring someone with you, and have things written down. In that way, if you get upset or lose your train of thought, the person you have brought with you for support can prompt you or ask things on your behalf.



## 4.9 Summary

The aim of this booklet has been to give you some tools to help you think about how best to communicate with those around you – friends, family members and professionals. This booklet has described four specific communication skills. When used together, these skills may reduce stress in your family and social life, and make it easier to solve problems and work towards your goals.

It can feel odd when saying or doing things differently, but persevere. After a while you will become more familiar with the steps and, as a result, you may find you have more confidence in your communication skills. When you do, you may feel more able to talk with the professionals involved in the care and treatment of your relative or friend. It might be that you want to tell a support worker that you really appreciated the time they spent with your relative. Or you might want to ask the receptionist to let you know if the clinic is running late. You might want to ask a member of the care team to organise a Carer's Assessment for you, or feel confident in asking the Psychiatrist for more information. You may be able to challenge staff in an assertive manner when they say they can't share information with you because of confidentiality issues as discussed in Booklet 3. Developing effective communication skills can be helpful in a variety of ways across a variety of settings. You have now completed the communication booklet of the workbook. It may be that you have covered all the topics you felt that you needed to look at. If so, keep practising the skills and come back to it whenever you need a refresher. However, having done this booklet it may be that you would like to explore other parts of the workbook.

## 4.10 Key learning points

- Mental health problems can put a strain on communication and make it hard to say the things we want to.
- It is easy to focus on negative things or on what's not going well and to pay less attention to the good things or to what is going well. We can all get into patterns that we know are not helpful but are difficult to change.
- The good news is that it is possible to learn ways of communicating in a positive way.
- The main skills that are helpful to use are being able to listen attentively, ask for things you want, comment when people do things that you like or appreciate, and being able to express difficult feelings in a way that is not damaging and that still values the person.
- Changing ways of communicating that have become stuck or unhelpful takes time, but can be done with practice, so be patient.
- The communication skills you learn in this booklet can be very useful in your contacts with professionals as well as in your family and with friends.

# Thank you to . . .

Producing a resource such as this relies on the support and contribution of a wide range of people. We consulted widely at the various stages of the development of the material in terms of content, layout and presentation, and would like to thank all of those who gave so generously of their time and ideas.

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One of the biggest tasks was reading through the earlier versions of the different sections which was a really time-consuming activity. We wanted to ensure that the material is meaningful, helpful and presented in a way that is easily accessible to carers and family members, so we enlisted the help of family members recruited through Rethink Mental Illness and the Meriden Family Programme. We are so grateful to those helped with this task – June Cooley, George Gladden, Michele Gladden, Edward Haslam, Christine Lewis, Philippa Lewis, Philippa Lowe, Maggie Morgans, Jeanette Partridge and Peter Woodhams. A number of other carers who equally spent hours reading through drafts and providing feedback did not wish to be named in person, so our heartfelt thanks to those 'anonymous' family members for all their time, commitment and valuable comments.

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# About the authors

**Gráinne Fadden** is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist based in Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Trust, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham and Director of the Meriden Family Programme. The cascade method of training and system of organisational change for improving services to families developed through the Meriden Programme have been adopted by several organisations within the UK and abroad. The Programme has been the recipient of numerous awards for 'Modernising Mental Health Services' and for 'Mental Health Innovation'. She was awarded the prestigious Marsh Lifetime Achievement Award by Rethink Mental Illness in 2009 for her outstanding contribution to mental health. Gráinne has been involved in family work and research throughout her career, and has written extensively on the effects of mental health problems on families, on how family members can be supported, and the training of mental health professionals. She links with a range of national bodies on issues relating to families and carers and has delivered training around the world.

**Carolyn James** qualified as a Clinical Psychologist in 2003. Currently she works in clinical health psychology and training, and prior to this she was part of a child and adolescent mental health team in East Birmingham. Before training Carolyn worked as a Research Assistant on a number of projects, including the Meriden Programme. Carolyn is proud to have been part of the Programme since the very beginning. She has maintained her links with the team since that time and returned to talking with families and therapists as part of her doctoral research. Carolyn was interested to find out what helped engagement in family therapy and, as a result of her work, developed a theory about some of the factors that therapists may need to consider when talking with families about Behavioural Family Therapy (BFT).

**Vanessa Pinfold** is a health services researcher. She joined Rethink Mental Illness in 2003 to establish a research team within the charity. Previously she worked at the Institute of Psychiatry, Kings College London. She is currently working as a part time research fellow at Rethink Mental Illness and is chair of The McPin Foundation – a small family charity that supports mental health research and promotes mental well being through innovative projects.

Vanessa has always had an interest in mental health carers and through research programmes has sought to develop practical tools to assist families and relatives of people with mental illness. She has been involved in the Time to Change campaign to end mental health discrimination and the re-development of Rethink Mental Illness 'Caring and Coping' training programme. Vanessa has also led the development of an online package to assist practitioners to work with families through timely and appropriate information sharing in mental health.

# Notes

A series of horizontal lines for writing notes, starting from a vertical dotted line on the left side.





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