

Wellbeing Newsletter

The active listening edition

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Making People Better



In this month's newsletter we talk about active listening and how to do it, summer SAD, why it's important to carve out time for a hobby, and managing the financial stress of the school summer holidays as a parent or carer.

This newsletter includes information about sensitive and potentially triggering topics.

What actually is 'active listening' and how do you do it?

You may have heard people use the term 'active listening'. It's a powerful skill that can help someone who's struggling to cope, to feel heard and better understood.

Given how beneficial it is, our mental health experts have explained what exactly active listening is, and have shared tips to help us all improve our active listening skills.

What is active listening?

Active listening is a communication skill that goes beyond hearing the words that someone says. It is listening to understand, rather than listening to respond. It can help to eliminate misunderstanding and can build a stronger alliance between speaker and listener.

Active listening involves preparing to listen, observing what verbal and non-verbal messages are being sent, and providing appropriate feedback to show the listener is being attentive to the message. The listener is more of a sounding board rather than someone who's there to provide their own opinion on a topic.

Five active listening techniques



Practising good eye contact

Eye contact is relatively simple and yet can make the world of difference to active listening. It helps the listener to stay grounded and present in the conversation and reduces the chances of distraction. However, there is always a balance, where the listener should not overcompensate with their eye contact – you don't want to make the conversation feel uncomfortable.



Noticing and using verbal and non-verbal communication skills

The vast majority of our communication skills are non-verbal, so paying attention to the speaker's non-verbal cues are just as important as listening to their verbal cues. Equally, the listener must be aware of their own non-verbal cues – lean into the conversation, nod at key points and maintain eye contact. Concentrate on both your own, and their, facial expressions.



Asking open-ended questions to help further the conversation

Open-ended questions demonstrate a genuine curiosity about the speaker, which can help them feel more valued. Open-ended questions you could ask include, "Can you tell me more about that?", "How did that make you feel?", and "What do you think could be the best path for you moving forwards?"



Summarising and reflecting back to the speaker

Summarising is a key skill used within therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This technique shows that the listener has understood what the speaker is saying, allows a space for the speaker to clarify anything, and helps the speaker to feel understood. After the speaker has spoken, the listener should summarise and paraphrase what they have heard.



Being non-judgemental

By remaining neutral, the listener is helping the speaker to feel comfortable and confident, which will enable them to share their true thoughts and feelings. Being non-judgmental creates a safe space where there is no fear of being criticised or blamed. It is also important to be patient and not fill quiet spaces or silences.



How to improve your active listening skills

Getting into the habit of active listening can improve many key areas of your life, including your personal and professional relationships. Active listening can also increase your knowledge of different people and different cultures, and can help to increase and improve collaboration.

Here are four things you could try to improve your active listening skills:

- Encourage your own curiosity - ask questions and seek to understand the people and situations around you.
- When getting to know someone, find common ground to talk about - if you're already interested in a topic it is easier to stay focused on it
- Practice - as with any skill, it takes practice to improve on. The more you practise, the better you can become. Equally, the more you demonstrate the skill of actively listening, the more other people learn about it. They may even start to practise it themselves.
- Learn when the conversation needs to be closed in a respectful way - this can help you to prevent the conversation turning into a negative.

Talk to Us campaign from Samaritans

Throughout July, Samaritans runs its awareness campaign Talk to Us, to remind people that they're always there for anyone who needs someone to listen. July 24 (24/7) also marks Samaritans Awareness Day, because they are available to listen, 24/7.

Find out what your local Samaritans branch is doing during Talk to Us - find a branch.

Whatever you're going through, Samaritans are there to face it with you. Call 116 123 for free or email jo@samaritans.org

Summer seasonal affective disorder (SAD): What is it, symptoms and how to manage it

Did you know?

SAD is most common in countries like the UK where there are large changes in the weather and daylight during the different seasons.



What is summer SAD?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of mood change that comes and goes in a seasonal pattern. It affects most people in the winter, but for a minority, it can cause summer depression too.

This means that for some people, a time of year often associated with sunshine, health and happiness, can be blighted by mood swings and heightened anxiety levels.

Common symptoms of summer SAD can include:



A persistent low mood



Increased feelings of despair, guilt or worthlessness



Changes in weight



Increased anxiety



Feeling lethargic and sleepy at unusual times



Cravings for carbohydrates and sweet foods



Loss of pleasure or interest in everyday activities



Sleeping for longer than normal and finding it hard to get up in the morning



Difficulties in concentration



Increased irritability



Loss of libido



How to manage summer SAD



Talk to someone

Whether it's peer support or professional support, sharing how you feel with someone else can help you to manage negative or spiralling thoughts and emotions.



Learn ways to relax

Find a relaxation technique that works for you - that might be progressive muscle relaxation, spending time in nature or taking a warm bath.



Get outside

Light therapy, both from the sunlight and light from artificial lamps, can simulate exposure to sunlight and help lift a person's mood.



Keep a diary

Keeping a log of symptoms can help you to spot patterns in your mood and behaviours. It can also help to identify triggers, which in turn can help you plan how to combat them.



Look after your physical health

Exercise during cooler parts of the day and wind down using movement and relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation or deep breathing. Gentle exercises, like yoga, swimming or walking can be just as beneficial as high impact activities.



Create a sleep action plan

Sleeping too little or too much can be a problem, so think about how your sleeping environment might be impacting you. Use blackout curtains, lighter blankets and have a fan in your room if needed. Create a regular sleep routine that you can stick to - both a routine to wind down and help you get ready for bed, and a routine to help you get up at a regular time in the morning.



Plan ahead

If you notice specific triggers, look at how you can plan around them. Rearrange stressful activities, plan things you enjoy and are relaxing, stock up on items that you might need, and carve out time to rest. Planning ahead can help you feel more in control.



Think about your diet

Eat regularly and be mindful of any cravings that occur. Try to avoid substances such as drugs or alcohol which can make symptoms of mental illness worse.



Reach out to your GP

Your GP can talk to you about management techniques that could help you, such as antidepressants and talking therapy.

Why carve out time for a hobby when you have very little time to spare?

It can be hard to hold down a new hobby or exercise routine. In the business of life, trying something new might not be high on your to-do list - and you're not alone.

However, having a hobby - which is anything we do in our own time that brings a sense of joy, pleasure or mastery - can be a great way to improve mental and/or physical health.

Here are just a few of the reasons why it's important to spend time on something we love, even when we have very little time to spare.



Connecting with others

Holding down a hobby can unlock a wealth of social benefits. Hobbies give many people a regular point of connection with others, which can help to combat loneliness. Often, hobbies offer a space to chat through difficult moments and talk about the things that are bothering us.

Knit and Natter groups - where people who enjoy knitting, crochet, cross stitch and other crafts come together to share tips, swap patterns, meet new people and learn new skills - are a great example of this in practice.



Creating a sense of belonging

Spending time with other people that share the same hobby allows us to feel like we belong to a group of others - especially when it might be a unique hobby. Having a sense of belonging and feeling accepted by others without judgement is important to our wellbeing because it helps us to be our true selves.



Focussing the brain and promoting mindfulness

Life can feel overwhelming at times - our brains can feel full to bursting with the things we need to remember, to-do lists, a stressful work day or anxieties about events in the future. Engaging in a task that takes all our focus can help calm the inner critic that can keep negative thoughts spinning.

During team sports, for example, we need to focus on tactics, teammates and winning the game or match - there's very little opportunity for the mind to wander into negative thinking. Painting is another example where focusing on the activity, specifically the colours, shapes and the object being painted, allows the brain to let go of spiralling thoughts.



Getting active

Sport-based hobbies have endless benefits for our mental and physical health. Exercise has been found to improve our mood and combat symptoms of depression. In fact, research has so strongly established this link that many doctors can prescribe exercise as part of a treatment intervention for depression.



Getting through difficult times

When we're faced with difficult periods in our life, a hobby can help to prevent the potential negative impact on our mental health, according to research. This is, in part, because hobbies provide us with healthy ways to manage stress effectively.

Six in ten Brits took up a new hobby* - which included gardening, reading, and baking - during the first Covid-19 lockdown. And almost all of those people were still making time for their hobby 12 months later. In fact, 80% of those surveyed said they could not imagine ever giving up their lockdown hobby.

Finding it difficult to start something new?

Feeling like a beginner can make it hard to try a new hobby. However, when you start to feel the mental and/or the physical benefits, and it becomes part of your routine, it's likely you'll gain the motivation to continue.

Remember that the magic of having a hobby is liking it, so don't force yourself to do something you don't enjoy. Test out different sports, activities and groups. There may even be free activities you can try out at your local community centre or leisure centre.

*Research commissioned by Samsung

How to manage the financial stress of the school summer holidays

If you're a parent or carer, you may be starting to worry about how you'll navigate work and childcare during the summer holidays.

It's a juggle many of us face every year and one that is often exacerbated for families whose work situations may not allow for flexibility, and who are unable to afford additional childcare costs.

The squeeze on time and money poses an almost impossible challenge for lots of parents and carers. It's little surprise that stress and burnout rises for many at this time of the year.

Did you know...

The average weekly cost for a holiday club is **£157 per child**, which is **2.3 times higher** than what parents pay for an after-school club during term time*.

This means that families face costs of **£934 for six weeks of holiday childcare** for each school age child - **£538 more** than they would pay for six weeks of after-school childcare during term time*.

Parents in inner London can pay up to **25% more** for places than those in the East of England*.

Not only can childcare be extra pricey, but its availability can also be limited. For parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), it can be particularly hard to find care - **9 in 10 families** are unable to source a suitable holiday club or activity for their disabled child**.

*Coram Family and Childcare's 18th annual Holiday Childcare Survey, 2023

**Contact and the Disabled Children's Partnership

Here are seven ways parents and carers can better manage money worries in the summer holidays:



Manage your expectations

As parents and carers, we want to make the summer holidays a magical, jam-packed time for our children but this is a huge expectation to put on ourselves. The reality is that children generally enjoy the simple things in life. Take a step back and think about the free or low-cost activities you can plan. If you're keen to put some bigger activities or days out in the diary but are worried about cost, choose two or three, and spread them out over the weeks.



Set yourself a budget

Before the holidays begin, sit down and work out how much you have to spend on activities for the kids over the summer holidays. Plan activities around what you can spend, not what you want to spend. Budgeting can help to avoid overspending, which may cause more stress overall.



Look for pre-loved or second hand toys and games

It can be really tempting to splash out on new toys and games to keep the kids entertained. If your budget is tight, shop on pre-loved or second hand sites like Facebook Marketplace or eBay.



Search for FREE activities

Although you might have to hunt for them, there are lots of free or subsidised activities for children and young people to get involved in over the holidays. Ask your local library and community centre what they have on, or look on websites like In Your Area.



Plan ahead and find special offers

Lots of companies give out free tickets or two-for-one offers for activities or events over the holidays. You'll often find these on cereal packets, and you may be able to use points on supermarket loyalty cards. If you're planning on buying train tickets, book as far ahead as you can. They usually go up in price the closer you get to the date.



Let your kids be bored

You don't have to fill every minute of the day with something fun and exciting. It's okay for children to 'be bored' now and then. Independent play time or uninterrupted time alone helps a child to build problem-solving skills and teaches independence. You may find this is when your child becomes most creative and inventive.



Enlist the help of others

As parents, we often feel guilty asking for help from others. Know that this is not a sign of weakness and it's OK to get support from family and friends. You could gather a group of friends who live locally and also have children, and agree on a day in the week when each will look after the children. It can really help to share the load of childcare, and it ensures you are each carving out a child-free day in the week. It's important to weave adult-only time into your day-to-day life.



Our tip of the month

The one thing we ask you to do today if you do nothing else...

Check how much water you've drunk today.

The NHS's Eatwell Guide recommends that people should aim to drink 6 to 8 cups or glasses of fluid a day. Water, lower-fat milk and sugar-free drinks, including tea and coffee, all count. Staying hydrated is particularly important during the warmer months. Not getting enough fluids can lead to dehydration.

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