



Hints and tips for having good conversations and understanding what matters to people

Putting the person at the centre of what we do means moving from a service-led approach to an outcome-focused approach.

This means:

- Moving away from seeing the assessment as a pre-determined set of questions. Moving towards having semi-structured conversations using open questions
- Moving away from obtaining and filtering information to complete a form. Moving towards a skilled interaction that includes active listening and reflecting back
- Moving away from identifying problems and deficits, and matching solutions to a menu of services. Moving towards building on strengths and capabilities, and finding co-produced, creative solutions
- Moving away from seeing the practitioner as the expert. Moving towards seeing the practitioner as a partner and enabler
- Moving away from recording being a tick box exercise. Moving towards seeing recording as an opportunity to build a clear picture of a plan for achieving outcomes

What do we need to build on as we prepare for engaging and collaborating with people to understand what matters to them?

- Reflective listening – understanding the feelings behind the person's words and behaviour
- Listening to whole families – understanding family dynamics and being able to share insights and understanding with family members
- Not asking too many questions or giving advice – instead helping people think and talk because then they are better able to find and maintain their own solutions
- Building confidence in others – using the same skilled listening principles
- Acceptance – understanding that things change over time or through circumstances

Before planning a conversation, consider:

- How to make sure that the person is as involved in the conversation as they want to be and/or can be. For example, do they require support such as advocacy?
- Has the person asked for anyone else to be present – who needs to be part of the conversation and who doesn't?
- Any communication needs – is an interpreter required? Do you need any documents in other formats or languages?
- Any cultural/religious considerations
- Any known risks, to you or the person, and how to mitigate these
- What the person might expect from the process

Remember:

- Listen to everyone in the room, all perspectives are valuable
- It's useful to understand the specifics from their perspective, there are no rights and wrongs
- Gently help people describe the exceptions to the problems and difficulties
- Help people gently explore a better picture
- Try not to push too hard or make your own suggestions about how things could improve
- Listen hard and reflect on what people are saying
- As they talk about their aspirations, greater clarity about what needs to change will emerge, support the person's sense of their own abilities
- Avoid arguments and confrontation

Five stages of a good conversation

1. Open engaging questions:

Tell me a bit about what's happening? NOT what's the problem and how can I help?

2. Active listening:

Let people know you are listening and understand
Reflective statements, reframing, summarising

3. Open exploratory questions:

What concerns you most? What do you notice when things are a bit better? What would be happening to make you less anxious?

4. Information exchange – if appropriate:

Would you like me to give you a bit more information?
Could I ask you for a little more information?

5. Summary and actions – home in on main issues

What are the strengths/skills/motivators you notice?
What actions have they decided to take?
Empowering summaries

There are some conversational traps that we should avoid falling into when we are trying to find out what really matters to a person:

Expert trap – I know best: "Given how tired you are, I think you should..."

Power trap – I am the decision-maker: "I think your mum should move into a care home"

Problem-solving trap – I can solve your problems: "We should... this will make you feel better"

Question and answer trap – I ask, you answer: "How? Why? What? When? Who? What? Why?"

Yes, but trap – I know better: "I see where you're coming from, but..."

Labelling trap – I know you: "I can see why you're being verbally aggressive... you lack insight"

Confrontation trap – You are wrong: "If you carry on like this, the situation will only get worse"

Strengths-based questions: Helping build a good 'what matters' conversation

- People sometimes find it difficult to focus on their strengths, but careful questioning and active listening can help a person describe their circumstances and identify potential
- An outcomes-focused, strengths-based approach places more emphasis on what the worker and family can achieve when they work together
- It explores less of what people can't do and places more emphasis on what they want to do
- It asks "what is strong?" rather than "what is wrong?"

Here are some examples of strengths-based questions that can be used at different points within the conversational journey:

Getting to know someone:

- Tell me what a good day looks like for you
- What are you most proud of in your life?
- What inspires you? What gives you energy?
- What do you like doing? What makes this enjoyable?
- When things are going well in your life, tell me what's happening
- How could/do your strengths help you be a part of the community?
- What is the most rewarding part of your life?
- When now, or in the past, have you felt like you were making a difference/making a contribution? How did you make this happen?
- How have you been able to develop your skills?
- What kind of support have you used that has been helpful to you? How did the support improve things for you?
- Tell me about any creative, different solutions you've tried. How did this work out?
- Can you think of one small, manageable step that would improve X for you?

Finding out strengths:

- Can you think of things you've done to help things go well?
- What small thing could you do that would make a difference?
- What achievements have you made? How did you make them happen?
- What do you find comes easily to you?
- What would other people who know you say you're good at doing?
- You are resilient – what do you think helps you bounce back?
- How have you faced/overcome the challenges you've had?
- Without being modest, what do you value about yourself? What are your greatest strengths?
- Tell me one (or three, five, 10) things you can do.
- Tell me about a time when you responded to a challenge in a way that made you feel really on top of things.

Finding out what's happening:

- What's working well?
- What have you tried – what has been helpful?
- What could be going better?
- On a score of 1-10, how would you say X is? What might make that score a little higher?
- What are the things in your life that help keep you strong?
- What are the positive factors in your life at the moment?

Let people know you are listening and understand:

- You're under a lot of stress at the moment
- You have some real worries and concerns
- You all care very much and want to help
- So, you feel you/your mum can manage these things okay... but these other things sometimes feel too difficult?

Finding out about family and friends:

- Tell me about how other people are contributing to things going well for you
- How have people around you helped you overcome challenges?
- Who is in your life? Who is important in your life?
- What could you ask others to do that would help create a better picture for you?
- What resources – such as people, aids, equipment, things in your community – do you have now? Do you know of any other resources that might be helpful for you?

Finding out about barriers:

- What stops things working better for you?
- When you think about X (whatever it is that is stopping things going well) is there anything you can think of that would help in any way?

Finding out about hopes:

- What would be happening if things were working better for you?
- What do you want to achieve in your life?
- What do you want more of? What do you want to keep the same?