

Samaritans at work

Jonathan Moran, Barry Lewis and **Steve Tollerton** introduce the workplace training courses run by the charity

Every year Samaritans receives over five million calls from people in emotional distress. The charity has used the art of listening to offer support to people feeling anxious, down and depressed, or despairing and suicidal, since 1953. It is most well known for its helpline – the first ever 24-hour telephone helpline to be set up in the world.

From 24-hour emotional support...

No matter where someone is in the UK or Republic of Ireland, no matter what their background or circumstances, the charity's 18,500 volunteers are there to support them from 201 branches nationwide. Not only can those in distress find support by phone but also by email, SMS or face-to-face in their local branch.

'Samaritans' volunteers provide a "listening service" founded on the belief that giving a person the opportunity to talk in confidence with someone who won't judge them, tell them what to do or take power away from them, is at the heart of

alleviating emotional distress,' explains the charity's workplace training manager, Jonathan Moran.

...to workplace training

Over the last seven years Samaritans has been running 'workplace' training courses developed on the key principles of its emotional support service, to help employees handle difficult contacts at work.

'Our volunteers are trained in active listening techniques using a model known as "the listening wheel" that has been developed using elements of the person-centered approach of Carl Rogers,' says Jonathan. 'We also discuss the concept of emotional health as a "continuum" rather than something which is "good" or "bad", which we call the "emotional health scale". Using this idea we encourage people to see how events and their accumulation can cause differing levels of emotional response in an individual. This emotional response is not necessarily dependent on the events themselves, but on the person's emotional health at that time.

'Facilitating people to externalise their circumstances and feelings by talking about their problems, can help build emotional strength and resilience in the face of life events,' he continues.

Using techniques from the Samaritans' listening wheel and emotional health scale, outlined below, the charity has devised the following four courses, which they adapt to suit the individual needs of each organisation they train:

- 1 How to handle difficult contacts
- 2 How to talk to someone who is suicidal
- 3 Working with people who self-harm
- 4 Tackling stress in the workplace.

The listening wheel

The listening wheel (see figure 1) consists of six key listening techniques. These are designed to promote 'active' listening and build a rapport with an individual in order to alleviate emotional distress and de-escalate anger and aggression:

1 Asking open questions: any questions not requiring a yes/no answer eg How? What? Where? Who? When? and Why?

2 Summarising: a summary helps to show the person that you have listened and understood their circumstances.



Jonathan Moran, workplace training manager, has worked in learning and development for more than 10 years. He has designed and delivered training in the insurance industry, local government and the not-for-profit sector as well as running Samaritans' workplace training courses for clients across all sectors. Jonathan is a registered NLP master practitioner and has been associated with Samaritans as a volunteer and training professional for more than 20 years. Tel 020 8394 8374 j.moran@samaritans.org



Barry Lewis, workplace training officer, joined the team with many years of experience in learning and development. He has designed, delivered and evaluated a full range of training programmes in various industries, and has been involved with all areas and at all levels of the learning and development cycle. As workplace training officer, Barry develops new and existing relationships to support the charity's growth and training initiatives in the workplace. Tel 020 8394 8373 b.lewis@samaritans.org



Steve Tollerton, workplace training officer, has worked with organisations at all levels, writing and delivering training programmes. As workplace training officer, he has designed and delivered courses specialising in communication skills to a wide range of organisations. Steve is highly skilled at training staff who deal with challenging situations. He is now in charge of training Network Rail employees as part of Samaritans' and Network Rail's partnership to reduce suicide. Tel 020 8394 8370 s.tollerton@samaritans.org

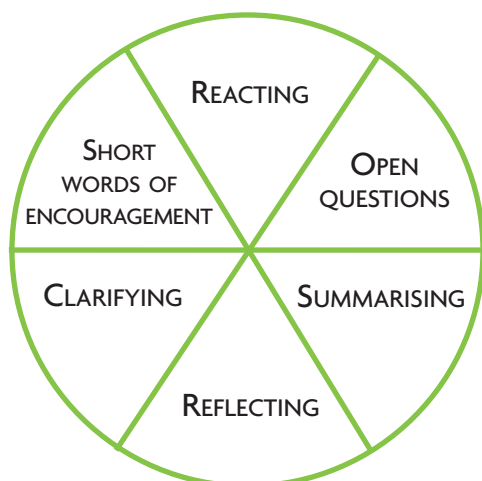


Figure 1. Samaritans' listening wheel

3 Reflecting: simply repeating back a key word or phrase encourages the person to go on and expand on what has been said.

4 Clarifying: sometimes a person will gloss over an important point or emotion. Phrases such as 'Tell me more about...' and 'Sounds like a difficult area for you', can help the person clarify these points for themselves.

5 Short words of encouragement: the person you are listening to may need help to go on with the story. A simple 'yes', 'go on', or 'I see' may help the person to continue, and shows that you are interested.

6 Reacting: the person is often looking for empathy and understanding. Phrases such as, 'That must have been difficult', or 'You've had a bad time,' can help. Reacting is vital for the human touch that is part of building rapport and trust.

The emotional health scale

The emotional health scale is a simple, visual model used by Samaritans to create an understanding of how an individual's baseline emotional health can affect their responses to life events (see figure 2).

'The aim of the model is to demonstrate in a straightforward, non-clinical and non-diagnostic way, how risk and protective factors can work to determine someone's emotional wellbeing.

'We are all at some point on the scale emotionally, typically within the area indicated by the arrows in the diagram. However, life's events move us up or down. It is rarely one incident but a combination of negative life events that move us towards the distress side of the scale,' explains Jonathan.

A very basic example of how someone who is emotionally healthy can move down the scale towards distress is as follows (see figure 3): Chris is passed over for a promotion at work and as a result his self-esteem suffers, moving him slightly down

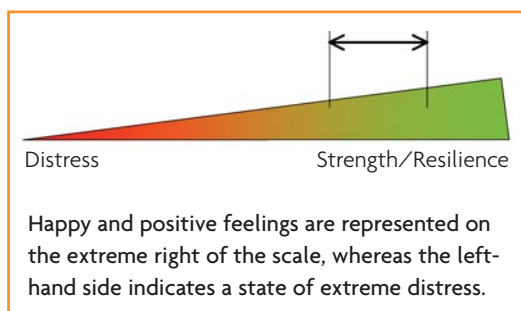


Figure 2. The emotional health scale

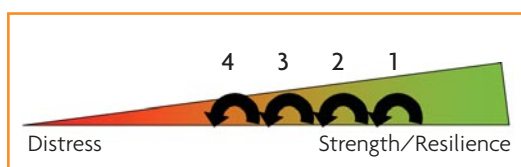


Figure 3. 'Chris' moving down the emotional health scale

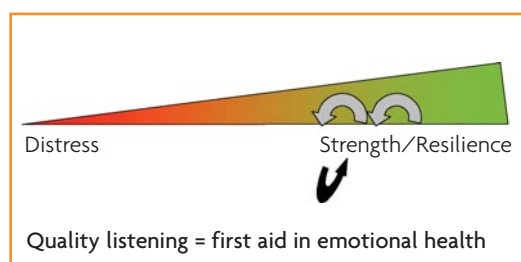


Figure 4. Breaking the chain of negative events

the scale (1). This puts pressure on an already difficult long-term relationship, causing it to end, which moves him down the scale again (2). As a result, his performance at work begins to suffer, leading to a reprimand, moving him even further down the scale (3). Finally, in a team meeting, Chris is allocated a piece of additional work which nobody wants to do, resulting in him feeling unable to cope and taking time off for stress (4).

It is not always the events themselves that are important, but the significance of those events to the individual, depending where they are on the emotional health scale at that given time. Any event that may seem relatively small at position 1 may in fact become significant at position 4.

Samaritans believes that when a person is able to externalise a problem, and the feelings associated with that problem, they feel better equipped to deal with it. 'Talking about a problem to someone who offers "good quality listening" can break the chain of negative events that has sent someone down the emotional health scale and possibly help them to begin to move back towards positive emotional health,' says Jonathan (see figure 4).

Course 1: How to handle difficult contacts

This is one of the most popular workplace courses Samaritans runs. It is aimed at 'frontline' staff, ie those who are in regular contact with customers or members of the public, either face-to-face, on the phone or via email. The course uses the aforementioned techniques to help staff to acknowledge difficult circumstances and feelings, enabling them to more easily move on and deal with the practical aspects of the call.

Jonathan Moran reveals: 'It's about helping staff realise that the first few minutes of a conversation and their initial response is critical in building rapport with someone.'

Course topics include:

- active versus passive listening
- acknowledging difficult feelings and circumstances
- how to show that you have listened and understood
- techniques to de-escalate an emotional situation
- making the first three minutes of the conversation count
- awareness of body language, tone of voice and choice of language
- appreciating the difference between assertion and aggression
- how to end a difficult conversation sensitively and professionally
- how to refer people to Samaritans for support.

Jonathan continues: 'We show employees that when someone is upset or angry, you need to acknowledge their feelings and circumstances, rather than assuming that they are "difficult", and responding accordingly.'

'We have little idea of how emotionally healthy someone is on first impressions and yet their baseline emotional health can obviously affect situations they find difficult. For example, if someone is already at the distressed end of the emotional health scale, it can sometimes be the smallest thing that causes them to lose control. Understanding this leads to better listening and therefore better conflict resolution.'

The charity runs training not only for staff who work in voluntary and statutory sectors but also commercial sectors such as finance. According to Samaritans' training team, staff at financial institutions are receiving an increasing number of difficult calls or emails from customers as current austerity measures begin to bite.

Case study: Samaritans has done a lot of training with Phillips and Cohen Associates UK, a probate recovery company, which often works with customers who have been recently bereaved.

Nick Cherry, site director, speaks of his experiences: 'Our employees spend all day talking to people who have only recently lost a loved one and can be significantly distressed. The training we have undertaken with Samaritans has helped ensure that our staff are equipped to engage with customers in a sensitive and compassionate way. They have also been helped to develop the emotional skills to cope with the personal stress of handling such emotive calls on a daily basis.'

'Many members of staff have told me that since having the training they feel their listening and empathy skills have greatly improved helping them to provide better customer service. Plus, they feel confident in being able to refer customers who are in serious distress to Samaritans for support.'

Course 2: How to talk to someone who is suicidal

Those who work directly with customers or members of the public may end up coming into contact with people who have suicidal feelings, and often feel they are not equipped to handle these situations.

During this course Samaritans' trainers show employees how they can approach someone who may be feeling suicidal. The sessions help give them the confidence and listening skills needed to help someone in distress explore their feelings. They aim to show staff that the simple act of allowing someone to talk openly about their feelings can help alleviate distress.

Course topics include:

- dispelling myths about suicide
- the benefits of talking about suicidal feelings
- how to recognise signs of distress and suicidal ideation
- how to approach someone who is distressed or appears suicidal, and begin a conversation
- how to refer someone who is feeling suicidal to Samaritans for support.

Samaritans' training officer, Steve Tollerton, gives some insight into the purpose of the course: 'It is not about trying to train staff to become qualified counsellors or Samaritans volunteers. Our aim is to take the concept of first aid and apply it to emotional situations. Those trained in first aid do not become medical experts but they are able to do some simple things, in the first instance, that can make the difference between life and death.'

Steve continues: 'Should staff find themselves in a situation where they are talking to someone who is suicidal, our course aims to help them know how to approach the situation in the most positive way and be aware of the types of responses that are likely to be most effective.'

Case study: Through its five-year partnership with Network Rail to reduce suicide on the railways by 20 per cent, Samaritans trains a number of staff from railway stations to recognise and talk to someone who is suicidal.

Lisa Clay, customer services assistant at Great Malvern railway station, shares her experiences of this course and how it has helped her:

'Whilst working an evening shift at the station, I noticed a man who appeared to be very upset; he was staring into space with tears rolling down his face. I went up to him and began talking to

Recognising signs of suicidal intent

Everyone expresses their feelings differently but some common signs of suicidal thoughts are:

- being withdrawn and isolating themselves from others
- giving possessions away
- wearing inappropriate clothing
- expressing ideas about how to end their life and talking or asking questions regarding death or suicidal methods
- talking about feeling isolated and lonely
- expressing feelings of failure, uselessness, lack of hope or loss of self-esteem
- constantly dwelling on problems for which there seem to be no solutions
- expressing the lack of a supporting philosophy of life, such as a religious belief.

him. After only a few minutes of conversation it was obvious he was extremely distraught as he kept saying 'What is the point of carrying on?' and 'I want to end it all'. We continued to talk for about 30 minutes and he told me about all his problems, past and present.

'I think he felt a little better for having someone to listen. I explained to him that I wasn't qualified to know where he should start to be able to put things right or start to make them better, but I knew an organisation that could support him. I gave him the contact details for Samaritans and urged him to call if he needed to. He thanked me for listening, took the information and appeared much calmer when he left the station.

'Before being trained by Samaritans, I would not have felt confident in managing this situation. I would have been fearful of intruding on this man's privacy or of saying the 'wrong' thing. The course has equipped me with the skills, ability and understanding of 'how to help' and 'what to say' in these difficult situations.'

MEL CURTIS/GETTY (POSED BY MODEL – FOR ILLUSTRATION PURPOSES ONLY)



Suicide myths

Myth: People who talk about suicide aren't really serious and are not likely to actually kill themselves.

Fact: People who kill themselves have often told someone that they do not feel life is worth living or that they have no future. Some may have actually said they want to die. People may talk about suicide as a cry for help but it is very important that everyone who says they feel suicidal, is treated seriously.

Myth: If a person is serious about taking their own life then there is nothing you can do.

Fact: Feeling suicidal is often a temporary state of mind. Whilst someone may feel low or distressed for a sustained period, the actual suicidal crisis can be relatively short-term. Offering appropriate and timely help and emotional support to people who are experiencing deep unhappiness and distress can reduce the risk of them dying by suicide.

Myth: Talking about suicide is a bad idea as it may give someone the idea to try it.

Fact: When someone feels suicidal they often do not want to worry or frighten others and so do not talk about the way they feel. By asking directly about suicide you give them permission to tell you how they feel. People who have been through such a crisis will often say that it was a huge relief to be able to talk about their suicidal thoughts. Once someone starts talking and exploring their feelings and worst fears, they have a greater chance of discovering options other than suicide.

Course 3: Working with people who self-harm

According to Samaritans, many staff who come into contact with people who self-harm feel a real sense of anxiety about how to respond effectively. Some fear making the situation worse and may feel out of their depth. This course explains to staff what self-harm is; how it is different to someone wanting to end their life and is often a means of someone trying to cope with difficult feelings.

'Colleges and universities frequently approach us for training,' says training officer Barry Lewis. 'We aim to dispel a lot of the myths that exist about self-harm, enhance understanding of the reasons why people do it and leave staff feeling more confident about how to approach the subject. Sometimes a referral to mental health services can take time and so someone might need some support in between.'

Course topics include:

- dispelling myths about self-harm
- understanding what self-harm is and why people do it
- recognising signs of self-harm in someone and how to raise the topic with them sensitively
- how to help someone assess the pros and cons of their self-harm while they await professional help
- how to refer someone suicidal to Samaritans or medical services for support.

Lewis continues, 'That first conversation, perhaps the first time a young person has spoken out about their self-harm, and the response they are met with, can be the catalyst that eventually leads them to begin to think about living without self-harm. It can take a lot of courage for someone to talk about their behaviour – the response they receive is critical in determining whether the conversation has a positive impact on the person's life.'

Case study: Northampton College approached Samaritans for training in order to raise staff awareness of self-harm. As a further education provider working with a lot of young people, they felt that it was important for their staff to understand what self-harm was and to be able to recognise the signs of someone who is self-harming.

Ann Meister, staff development coordinator at the college, shares her experiences of the course: 'Our staff gave really positive feedback – they found it a very informative and enlightening training session that raised awareness of what self-harm actually means. People left the session feeling more confident about how they could recognise the signs that someone was self-harming.'

Course 4: Tackling stress in the workplace

Increasingly, Samaritans are approached by organisations to address the impact of stress in the workplace.

'Many HR departments are finding that although they have processes in place to tackle stress-related issues in the workplace before they escalate, managers lack the skills and confidence to respond appropriately in the first instance,' says Jonathan Moran. 'This course focuses on helping managers to initiate conversations with their staff about emotional health issues before exploring possible solutions. It helps managers recognise that they have a responsibility to address stress-related problems at an early stage, reducing levels of long-term absence and increasing productivity.'

Course topics include:

- how to apply a practical model for considering the 'whole' person at work
- recognising the danger of assumptions we may make about who does or doesn't need our support in the workplace
- how to recognise physical, emotional and mental signs of stress
- communicating more effectively when handling challenging management situations
- learning to reduce levels of stress and enhance the effectiveness of a team.

Open courses

Typically, the charity runs courses for organisations with up to 20 people. However, over the last few years many individuals have approached Samaritans independently, hoping to attend a course for themselves.

Jonathan Moran explains: 'We began to realise that there were a large group of people who wanted to attend our training who effectively weren't able to. For the first time we are now running the "Handling difficult contacts" course at venues in central London. It is open to any interested individuals, and so far is proving very popular.'

Details of all Samaritans' training courses are at www.samaritans.org/training or phone Annie Ralph, 020 8394 8372. ■

How can anyone experiencing emotional distress contact Samaritans?

Samaritans' volunteers are available 24/7 to offer confidential, non-judgemental support to anyone experiencing emotional distress and suicidal feelings. Phone: 08457 90 90 90, email: jo@samaritans.org, or face-to-face: details of local branches are at www.samaritans.org