Appendix 3

**Talking to young people about self-harm**

- Focus on listening
- Don’t talk too much
- Don’t pretend to understand
- Don’t be afraid to make eye contact
- Offer support
- Acknowledge how hard it is to discuss these issues
- Don’t assume that an apparently negative response is actually a negative response
- Don’t break your promises—or make promises you can’t keep

The information below has been adapted from material produced by the PHSE Association in 2013, using young people’s words.

1. **Focus on listening**
   “She listened, and I mean REALLY listened. She didn’t interrupt me or ask me to explain myself or anything, she just let me talk and talk and talk. I had been unsure about talking to anyone but I knew quite quickly that I’d chosen the right person to talk to and that it would be a turning point.”

If a young person has come to you, it’s because they trust you and feel a need to share their difficulties with someone. Let them talk. Ask occasional open questions if you need to in order to encourage them to keep exploring their feelings and opening up to you. Just letting them pour out what they’re thinking will make a huge difference and marks a huge first step in recovery. Up until now they may not have admitted even to themselves that there is a problem.

2. **Don’t talk too much**
   “Sometimes it’s hard to explain what’s going on in my head – it doesn’t make a lot of sense and I’ve kind of gotten used to keeping myself to myself. But just ‘cos I’m struggling to find the right words doesn’t mean you should [find them for me]. Just keep quiet, I’ll get there in the end.”

The young person should be talking at least three quarters of the time. If that’s not the case then you need to redress the balance. You are here to listen, not to talk. Sometimes the conversation may lapse into silence. Try not to give in to the urge to fill the gap, but rather wait until the young person does so. This can often lead to them exploring their feelings more deeply. Of course, you should interject occasionally, perhaps with questions to the young person to explore certain topics they’ve touched on more deeply, or to show that you are supportive. Don’t feel an urge to over-analyse the situation or try to offer answers. This all comes later. For now your role is simply one of supportive listener. So make sure you’re listening!
3. **Don’t pretend to understand**

“I think that all teachers got taught on some course somewhere to say ‘I understand how that must feel’ the moment you open up. YOU DON’T – don’t even pretend to, it’s not helpful, it’s insulting.”

The concept of self-harm can seem completely alien if you’ve never experienced these difficulties first hand. You may find yourself wondering why on earth someone would do these things to themselves, but don’t explore those feelings with the sufferer. Instead listen hard to what they’re saying and encourage them to talk and you’ll slowly start to understand what steps they might be ready to take in order to start making some changes.

4. **Don’t be afraid to make eye contact**

“She was so disgusted by what I told her that she couldn’t bear to look at me.”

It’s important to try to maintain a natural level of eye contact (even if you have to think very hard about doing so and it doesn’t feel natural to you at all). If you make too much eye contact, the young person may interpret this as you staring at them. They may think that you are horrified about what they are saying. On the other hand, if you don’t make eye contact at all then a young person may interpret this as you being disgusted by them – to the extent that you can’t bring yourself to look at them. Making an effort to maintain natural eye contact will convey a very positive message to the young person.

5. **Offer support**

“I was worried how she’d react, but she just listened then said ‘How can I support you?’ No one had asked me that before and it made me realise that she cared. Between us we thought of some really practical things she could do to help me stop self-harming.”

Never leave this kind of conversation without agreeing next steps. These will be informed by your conversations with appropriate colleagues and the Stockport policy on this issue. Whatever happens, you should have some form of next steps to carry out after the conversation because this will help the young person to realise that you’re working with them to move things forward.

6. **Acknowledge how hard it is to discuss these issues**

“Talking about [self-harm] for the first time was the hardest thing I ever did. When I was done talking, my teacher looked me in the eye and said ‘That must have been really tough’ – he was right, it was, but it meant so much that he realised what a big deal it was for me.”

It can take a young person weeks or even months to admit they have a problem to themselves, let alone share that with anyone else. If a young person chooses to confide in you, you should feel proud and privileged that they have such a high level of trust in you. Acknowledging both how brave they have been, and how glad you are they chose to speak to you, conveys positive messages of support to the young person.

7. **Don’t assume that an apparently negative response is actually a negative response**
“The voice in my head was telling me to push help away so I was saying no. But there was a tiny part of me that wanted to get better. I just couldn’t say it out loud or else I’d have to punish myself.”

Despite the fact that a young person has confided in you, and may even have expressed a desire to get help, that doesn’t mean they’ll readily accept help. The illness may ensure they resist any form of help for as long as they possibly can. Don’t be offended or upset if your offers of help are met with anger, indifference or insolence; it’s the illness talking, not the young person.

8. **Never break your promises**

“Whatever you say you’ll do, you have to do, or else the trust we’ve built in you will be smashed to smithereens. And never lie. Just be honest. If you’re going to tell someone just be upfront about it, we can handle that, what we can’t handle is having our trust broken.”

Above all else, a young person wants to know they can trust you. That means if they want you to keep their issues confidential and you can’t then you must be honest. Explain that, whilst you can’t keep it a secret, you can ensure that it is handled within your organisation’s policy of confidentiality and that only those who need to know about it in order to help will know about the situation. You can also be honest about the fact you don’t have all the answers or aren’t exactly sure what will happen next. Consider yourself the young person’s ally rather than their saviour and think about which next steps you can take together, always ensuring you follow relevant policies and consult appropriate colleagues.