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A useful conversation

The Accidental Counsellor Conversations with young people

There are five papers in this series:

- *'A useful conversation'*
- *'A therapeutic chat'*
- *'When you hear something that worries you'*
- *'The whole person health check'*
- *'Confidentiality, Boundaries and Duty of Care.'*

Comments common to all five papers

The following opening comments appear in each of the papers, so if you are familiar with them, feel free to skip ahead.

Not a counsellor; but an 'accidental counsellor'

These papers are not about how to be a counsellor; you need to study for some time for that. But if a young person trusts you, whether you are a young person yourself, a friendly adult or a professional worker with young people, then you might find yourself having conversations about important things. These papers aim to help you handle those conversations in the best possible way. They are intended for people who are untrained as counsellors but who would like to be better equipped to manage tricky and important conversations when they pop up.

What you are trying to achieve?

A conversation with a young person may help them solve a problem, help them think something through, express a feeling, work out what next in life, or identify a concern, a hope or a dream. It might just be fun and interesting, or importantly, it might simply give a young person a chance to talk and to be heard. It might also strengthen the relationship between the two of you. All good results.

You do need to practice

While we all have conversations, and sometimes within those conversations, unexpected things happen and we manage them the best way we can, being an accidental counsellor means for many of us, that we are repeatedly in situations where we find ourselves in this role, and consequently some preparation for these moments is wise. These papers provide tools to help you manage these moments, and some practice, most likely with friends and family, will help you become

more comfortable with asking questions which often have a quite deliberate intention, yet maintain a natural flow to a conversation.

Questions, questions and more questions...and then listening

Asking questions is at the heart of this approach. Questions help a person find their own answers and help them be in charge of finding their own path in life. Where it makes sense to do so, the questions in these papers are divided into groups in two ways:

- Questions you might ask at each of the stages of a conversation; the beginning, middle and end
- Groups of questions to ask at each of those stages.

Just as important in this process, however, is listening. And sometimes that's all we do; maybe with the occasional comment or question, but just listening. Asking question and listening carefully are the two sides of the same coin.

ONE GOLDEN RULE for EVERY conversation:

If you think the person may:

- Harm themselves
- Harm someone else
- Is in danger of being harmed by someone.

Immediately get help for both of you.

Kids help line 1800 551 800

<http://www.kidshelp.com.au>

Lifeline Australia 13 11 14

<http://www.lifeline.org.au>

Headspace 1800 650 890

<http://www.headspace.org.au/>

Reachout

<http://au.reachout.com/>

Boundaries, Confidentiality and Duty of Care

These three things background any conversation, with any person of any age. There is a separate paper in this series which addresses each of these, but the essentials are covered below.

Confidentiality

'Confidentiality' means keeping private what someone has told you and not telling others about the details of your conversations. However, it is often not as simple as this and there are two important questions to ask yourself:

*'Will this person be better off or worse, safer or more in danger...
...if I keep this to myself?
...or if I tell someone about it?'*

Your answers to these questions guide what you do next.

Boundaries

A 'boundary' is about how you behave; it's about what you will do and what you won't do. The important question here is:

'What is the best way for me to act right now to help this person?'

Duty of care

This means that we have a legal and moral responsibility to act in a way that genuinely cares not only for the person we are speaking with, but with others who may be involved in their life in some way. And we are bound both morally and legally, to take action if we think a young person, or someone else, is in danger of harm or being harmed. The question to ask here is:

*'What can I do to best protect and care for this young person?
And for others?'*

Your job in all conversations

- Be calm. Breathe
- Do listen carefully
- Stay with what they are telling you; don't change topics, even if what they are telling you is disturbing
- Remember this: You do not need to solve the person's problem; even if they ask you: 'what should I do?'
- Do ask questions to get clear what they are saying
- Do ask questions to help them explore what's on their mind, whether it is worrying or exciting
- You have opinions, and it's usually good to keep them to yourself
- You have had life experiences, and it's usually good to keep these to yourself too
- Do inspire confidence and, especially if it's worrying, hope. Let them know:
 - It's good they are talking with you
 - Because together you can now work out what to do next.

A useful conversation

A 'useful' conversation is just that. It's likely to be fun, light-hearted, friendly, possibly with jokes and laughter, and with elements of seriousness or importance. It may well not change a person's life in any major way; it's no more, but certainly no less, than one of those moments that contribute to a person's life. And for this reason alone, it matters.

Conversations often just develop naturally and pleasantly. However, sometimes if a person is a little shy or embarrassed, doesn't yet know you well, speaks English imperfectly, or is a little uncertain for a whole bunch of reasons about talking, or about talking to you, then there are some straightforward conversational strategies that you can call on to help the conversation get started, flow, and be interesting and meaningful to both of you.

Active listening and open-ended questions

These two well-known strategies I have included here because as familiar as they may be to many of us, they are still useful allies in a conversation.

Active listening

Active listening is what all good conversationalists do naturally. It's about being interested in what the other person is saying, encouraging them to say more, letting them know you are listening and checking to make sure that you have understood by saying back to them, in your own words, what they have said to you.

- 'It sounds like you are really enjoying your work/life/school?'
- 'Coming home late got you into trouble with your mum and she's grounded you?'
- 'You think your girlfriend/boyfriend/partner is being mean by not talking to you?'
- 'Let me see if I have this right. The thing that matters most to you is....'
- 'It sounds like that you became really upset/angry/excited...'
- 'So you're saying that...'
- 'You feel that she/he has been unfair to you...'
- 'It seems like you have been having a kind of mixed experience...?'
- 'Looks like you are missing your old friends, but making new ones?'

Asking open-ended questions

This is really part of active listening. Closed questions will usually get a 'yes' or a 'no'. They are a normal part of conversation and we all use them. There are also times when open-ended questions can really help a conversation. Open-ended questions tend to do precisely what the name suggests; 'open up' a conversation. They give the other person a chance to say more.

CLOSED: Are you enjoying living in your new home?

OPEN: What's it like for you in your new home?

CLOSED: Do you like your school?

OPEN: What do you think of your school?

CLOSED: Do you like R&B music?

OPEN: What sort of music do you like?

CLOSED: Have you been overseas?

OPEN: If you could go overseas, where would you go?

Just listening

It's not always the easiest thing to do, but sometimes the best thing we can do for a person is to just listen to them. At times just adding the occasional open-ended question or doing a little active listening. This is sometimes enough for a person to work through their own thoughts and feelings. And you can confirm for them, because you are listening, that they have a sympathetic ear when they need it.

Asking questions

There may also be times when you think it would be useful to find out a little more, explore something, or get a better sense for both yourself and the young person of just what is happening for them. At these moments, 'questions' are your greatest ally. Even if you are friends, asking questions is what friends do. It's just that these questions might be a little different. Questions, (but not interrogation) are at the heart of a good conversation. Asking questions (without intruding!) shows interest and generates more conversation.

The development of a conversation

Most conversations tend to have the simple stages of beginning, middle and end. The questions below are organized into these three stages as a way of thinking about which questions best fit into a conversation at different times, but in reality, any question can be asked at any time.

AT THE BEGINNING

The beginning of a conversation is when you are most likely to ask about things in general; how the person is, how their life is and what's been happening.

Asking about what's on a person's mind

This type of question encourages a person to tell you more about what has been happening in their life.

- 'That sounds like fun. What happened then?'
- 'Was that difficult?'
- 'What do you think of...?'

- 'Just what do you think was going on for that person?'
- 'What do you think about all this?'
- 'And what are you feeling?'

Finding out if it's okay to talk more

This type of question checks to see if the person wants to talk more. These questions show both respect and compassion.

- 'That sounds fantastic. Can you tell me more about that?'
- 'You sound kind of upset, is it okay if I ask you to tell me how come?'
- 'You seem kind of down, can we talk about that or...?'
- 'Wow. I can see you are really excited. Is this something you can tell me about?'
- 'Life seems kind of hard for you right now. Would it help to talk about that a bit?'
- 'I can see that you are really keen to have a go at that, would it be okay to talk about just why you are so keen?'
- 'What you have told me sounds really complicated; do you want to talk it through a bit?'

Talking about what's important to the person

These questions might be in relation to something specific you are discussing or questions in a general discussion. They aim to help a person put into words, things which are important to them. Doing so can help a person be clearer about their own thoughts and feelings and sometimes also what they would like to do next.

- 'How important to you is this...event/moment/person?'
- 'Is this something you expected?'
- 'Do you feel it is a really important thing for you?'
- 'What has been important to you in your life that has made a real difference to you?'
- 'What really inspires you?'
- 'And what do you really, really just not like?'
- 'What helps you feel good when you need it?'

TOWARDS THE MIDDLE

The middle part of the conversation is more an exploration of the meaning to the person, of what's been happening in their life; and the significance of any major events, positive or negative.

Talking about feelings

These questions encourage a person to think about, identify and put into words their feelings about an event, person, place, a problem or a hope.

- 'When that first happened, how did you feel? And how do you feel now?'
- 'How confusing has it been for you lately where 1 is "I have absolutely no idea what's going on!", and 10 is "I know every detail about everything!".'

- 'How much fun have you been having lately where 1 is "Life is totally boring" and 10 is "Life is a non-stop party!".'
- 'How have things been since you moved here, where 1 is "a total disaster" and 10 is "absolutely fabulous?"'
- 'How much control do you think you have in your life right now? A lot, a little, none at all; or...?'
- 'Has that been fun, confusing, exciting, worrying...or all of these? Or something else?'
- 'How do you feel about what's been happening?'
- 'How would your friends know if you were grumpy?'
- 'When you are totally excited about something, how do you show it?'

Encouraging thinking, without arguing for any choice

These questions encourage a deeper exploration of a topic or concern but without suggesting any possible course of action. They aim to help the person become clearer about their thoughts and feelings.

- 'If you just decided to do something...what would that be?'
- 'What if that never changes?'
- 'What can you do to start to sort that out?'
- 'Do you reckon you might need some help with that?'
- 'What sort of help do you think you might need?'
- 'Do you know where to get that help?'
- 'Do you usually like to plan things, or just make things up as you go?'
- 'What do you think could go wrong with that plan?'
- 'And, when you need to stop and think, how do you do that?'

Talking about life

These questions draw attention to the things which help a person flourish and enjoy life

- 'What is it that you really enjoy doing?'
- 'What is it that just lifts your spirits up?'
- 'What is it that:
 - Brings out the best in you?
 - Keeps you focused?
 - Calms you down?
 - Relaxes you?
 - Excites you?
 - Inspires you?
- 'How do you make sure you have all that good stuff in your life as much as possible?'

Talking about possibilities

These questions encourage a sense of thinking about what might happen next in this person's life.

- 'What do you think would happen if...?'
- 'If everything turns out just the way you want it to, what exactly will happen?'
- 'What can you do to make that come true?'

- 'Who could help you think that through?'
- 'What are the pros and cons of each choice?'
- 'If...does happen, how will you feel?'
- 'If...does not happen how will you feel?'
- 'And what do you think about all this?'
- 'And, when you need it, what do you do that just makes you feel wonderful?'

If the person gets stuck

It is not always necessary for questions to have answers nor is conversation itself always necessary. Not knowing answers or just sitting peacefully are very acceptable things to do. If you do wish to ask questions then, at times, being more practical, concrete or realistic can help. Ask about what, where, when and how and ask for descriptions. And these questions apply equally to positive and negative experiences. They can be handy questions if a person can't quite put into words what they are thinking or feeling or are uncertain about both or either. The more concrete things often lead into feelings and thoughts about those things.

- 'Where were you at the time?'
- 'Describe where you were?'
- 'What sort of place was it?'
- 'What were you doing?'
- 'Would you go there again?'
- 'And would you do the same thing again or...?'
- 'And was there anyone else there?'
- 'And was the whole thing fun? Unusual? Interesting? Worrying? Encouraging?'

Talking about thoughts and feelings

These questions are a development from the more concrete ones above. They are also stand alone questions that can follow the description of any event to help a person put into words their response to an event.

- 'What was going through your mind at the time?'
- 'And what were you feeling?'
- 'And now, what are your thoughts?'
- 'And your feelings now?'
- 'Looking back to that time, how important was that moment?'
- 'What do you think it means to you now?'

TOWARDS THE END

The end of a conversation tends to have a 'what now?' or 'what next?' feel to it. It doesn't need to find a solution to a problem or sort out a person's life; the chat you have had may be all that is needed for now. And here you are likely to have some responsibility in determining whether you talk more or finish. If the conversation starts to go back over the same topics, it may be time to close. If the person is agitated,

some quiet non-discussing time might be useful. If some action is required by either or both of you, then take it, making sure it is seen as the next step and not necessarily a total solution. It is part of this process.

Spotlighting a person's strengths

These questions draw attention to and deliberately notice the personal resources a person has to help them manage life.

- 'In the past, when you have been unsure, what have you done?'
- 'What's the most difficult thing you have ever done?'
- 'How did you manage to do that?'
- 'What can you rely on in yourself to help you carry that through?'
- 'What did you do to solve that problem?'
- 'When you have been brave, how have you managed to do that?'
- 'What brings out the best in you?'

Spotlighting strengths around a person

These questions spotlight interpersonal resources. They ask a person to look at what is around them; people, places, things, that they might access as they need them.

- 'What places do you really enjoy being?'
- 'What things do you enjoy doing?'
- 'And if you wanted to challenge yourself, what, who or where would do that for you?'
- 'If you needed a chat, who would you speak with?'
- 'And if you needed a bit of support?'
- 'If you wanted to just have a laugh, who would be the best person for you?'
- 'Where would you go if you needed some solid guidance?'

Questions of imagination

These questions encourage creative and imaginative thought about adventurous or less obvious possibilities.

- 'If you had just one wish about...what would you wish for?'
- 'Go on, make a wish. What would it be?'
- 'If you were principal of your school/mayor of your town/in charge at work; what law would you change or make...if any?'
- 'Okay...a little different...if you were in charge of the world for just 5 minutes...what would you do to make it a better place?'
- 'It's wish time...you have three wishes about...what are they?'

Exploring the future

These questions encourage thought about what the future might hold. They go hand in hand with 'Questions of Imagination' above.

- 'Give me just one sentence to describe what you think might happen next?'
- 'In just a couple of words, can you tell me how the future is looking for you at this moment...?'
- 'What is one thing that you would like to see "shift" in your life?'

- 'What can you do to make that happen?'
- 'If you were going to get that happening, how would you get started?'
- 'What/where/who would be the best place for you to get some help?'
- 'How are you going to keep yourself on track while you are doing that?'

The value of such a conversation?

Any conversation can make a positive difference. Any one or more of a number of things may have happened:

- Something worthwhile, however small, has been added to the life of the young person; an exchange, a dialogue, something which has stimulated interest, an expression of concern from another human being...
- A young person feels more inclined to return to, or continue to be involved (with you, with a service, the school, the programme...)
- A connection or deeper connection, has been made. So that just in case, if the need arises, they have someone to turn to.

A final comment

Again, this is not about being a counsellor, but it is about responding as compassionately, respectfully and as helpfully as possible to those you talk with, whether these moments just arise, or are created by you. If you have any questions or comments, please do get in touch.

Peter Slattery