



## ***Psychology for Positive Change***



# **HELPING PEOPLE TO COPE**

A brief, practical resource pack to support 'helpers' (e.g. psychologists, coaches, therapists) who are supporting people with coping, resilience & wellbeing.

Director: Mark Adams CPsychol MISCP (Accred)  
Educational & Coaching Psychologist  
HCPC Registered Practitioner Psychologist  
Chartered Psychologist

**E:** [mark@adamspychologyservices.co.uk](mailto:mark@adamspychologyservices.co.uk)

**W:** [www.adamspychologyservices.co.uk](http://www.adamspychologyservices.co.uk)

**T:** 07930 432807

**HELPING OTHERS WITH COPING, RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING: AN AIDE-MEMOIRE**

---

This resource pack aims to provide 'helpers' (e.g. psychologists, coaches, therapists) with an accessible-in-a-hurry bank of statements and questions that might be helpful to explore when supporting others to develop coping strategies, resilience and wellbeing. This might take place in the context of any 'helping' conversation (e.g. coaching, mentoring, supervision, therapy, everyday conversation, telephone or online support). The questions have been drawn from a range of ways of working, including solution-focused, cognitive-behavioural and Acceptance & Commitment Therapy-informed approaches to helping others. Some of the questions have been borrowed or adapted from Russ Harris's helpful resource on how to face the Coronavirus crisis (FACE COVID). Thanks to him. I also borrowed one of the 'key messages' from a communication from Tim Conroy-Stocker (Educational Psychologist). Thanks to him too, and thanks to Jack & Ina Humphreys for helping me to shape and improve this document.

A crucial caveat to bear in mind is that, while questions can be helpful, they are not the most important ingredient of the helper's approach. No matter how well-crafted the question, nor how technically-skilled the questioner, the questions are not as important as the strength and quality of the *collaborative alliance* that exists between helper and helpee (see e.g. Murphy & Duncan, 2007; Bordin, 1979). In other words, questions do not take precedence over the helpee's experience of a relationship in which they sense the helper is interested in them, has their interests at heart, is willing to try to get 'on the same page', and is aligning their efforts to support the helpee in reaching their goals in a way that works for them. This must take place in the context of an interpersonal climate in which the person being helped feels safe, trusted, accepted, respected, validated, valued, listened to and heard (Rogers, 1961). Without attending to these crucial ingredients, no helper will be as effective as they might be. Questions should not detract the helper's attention from these crucial variables.

Key reminders for helpers might include:

- How am I building and maintaining rapport?
- How am I creating a non-judgemental climate?
- Am I listening?
- What is the person saying?
- What is their experience?
- What is that like for them?
- Can I make an attempt at understanding either their situation or the meaning of what they are saying?
- When I communicate my understanding to the person, am I on-track or wide of the mark?
- To what extent are we on the same page? What more can I do to try to get on the same page?
- How am I communicating respect and valuing of the person, their perspective and their experience?

With this in mind, the opening pages of this pack first explore what listening is *not*, before reviewing and clarifying how we can listen effectively. After that, we come onto the guiding questions.

I hope you find the contents of this pack helpful.


**Mark Adams CPsychol MISCP (Accred)**

Educational &amp; Coaching Psychologist

Chartered Psychologist

HCPC Registered Practitioner Psychologist

Accredited Member of the International Society for Coaching Psychology

**WHAT LISTENING AIN'T**

---



Gordon (1970, 2000) points out that in everyday speech there are a number of 'roadblocks to communication' that do NOT constitute listening. Rather than 'staying with' or further exploring the meaning of the person's statement, these are responses that divert the conversation, get in the way or introduce more of the helper's own thoughts, for example:

*Why don't you.....*(Prescribing)

*I know how you feel.... You poor thing* (Sympathizing, consoling)

*Just like what happened to me when....* (Changing the subject, taking over)

*Don't get upset, cheer up.* (Directing)

*But you're such a strong person, you'll cope* (Reassuring, lecturing).

These are termed 'roadblocks' because they each divert the person/conversation away from the meaning of what the person has just said. While at some points in a conversation there may be times when the helper *does* intentionally introduce more of their own thoughts or ideas (hopefully more skilfully than in the above examples!), we need to be conscious and mindful that such responses are *not* listening.

## LISTENING / CREATING A CLIMATE OF ACCEPTANCE

---

*“Acceptance is not the same thing as agreement or approval. It is possible to accept and understand a person’s perspective while not agreeing with or endorsing it... The crucial attitude is a respectful listening to the person with a desire to understand his or her perspectives.”*

(Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p. 37).

A vital skill for creating an atmosphere of acceptance is *Reflective Listening*.

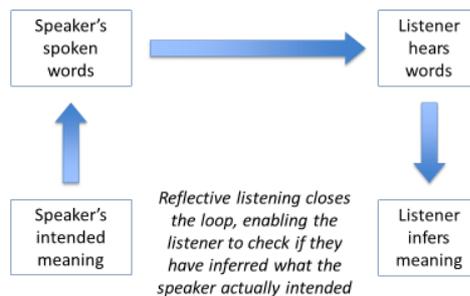
Reflective listening is an art – and, done well, it is indeed an art - of communication in which the listener focuses attentively on what the person is saying and then communicates that understanding in the form of a statement. This demonstrates that the listener has heard and understood the key message in what the speaker is saying, while also enabling both parties to check that they are on the same page.

Reflective listening statements often take the form of a sentence that contains the word “You...” (e.g. “You sound like you aren’t sure where to go next from here,” or “You’re excited about the new opportunity this presents”, or “As well as being concerned about the situation, you’re also worried about how others will cope”).

Reflective listening statements might also begin with the phrase “Sounds like...” (e.g. “Sounds like you’re starting to get a bit frustrated having been cooped up together”).

This is important because communication can be a messy process in which meanings can be misarticulated and misinterpreted. Reflective listening circumvents this danger by giving the speaker the opportunity to check if the listener has heard them correctly, while enabling both partners to collaboratively shape between them the meaning of what has been said.

### Why listen reflectively?



(Adapted from Gordon, 1970)

ADAMS PSYCHOLOGY SERVICES



The aim is to tune into, understand, and (hopefully accurately) articulate the person’s meaning. If the attempt at understanding is wide of the mark, it gives both parties the opportunity to get back on the same page.

Regular **summarising** at junctures throughout the conversation can also provide another ‘checking-in’ opportunity (“Have I summarised that correctly? Have I missed anything? Anything else?”) while further cementing the sense of being ‘on the same page’ and the person’s sense of feeling heard.

All of this helps to create the climate that is so crucial for change to occur.

Within this climate, we can then ask questions to structure and steer the conversation.

## **QUESTIONS FOR GUIDING CONVERSATIONS**

---

### **Openers**

How are you?

How are things?

How have things been since last time?

### **Identifying a focus for the conversation**

What would you like to talk about?

What's on top for you at the moment?

How would you like to use the time we have?

What are your best hopes for this conversation?

### **Exploring the person's goals/preferred future**

How would you like things to be different?

Imagine it's six months from now, and things have changed in a way that you're pleased with... What would that look like? For you? For others?

What would a sign of progress be?

### **Understanding the person's reality**

What's happening at present?

Can you give me an example?

What did that look/sound like?

Tell me more about....

In what way?

In what way is this a problem for you? [to be used sensitively]

How are you feeling at the moment?

I imagine you might be feeling somewhat [tentative suggestion]?

**Exploring 'exceptions' (times when the preferred future is happening to a degree, or when things aren't as bad)**

When have things been better?

On a scale from 0-10, where are things now? Why are they [x] and not any lower?

What green shoots are there that can be nurtured?

**Having a balanced perspective**

What are you noticing that is positive or nourishing?

What are some of the less-bad things at present?

**Helping the person focus on what they can control or influence**

What have you got more control over?

How much control do you have over that?

On a scale from 0-10, how much control do you have over that?

Which of these things might you be able to influence in some way?

**Exploring coping strategies**

What are some simple ways in which you can look after yourself/those you live with? (consider e.g. activities, time spent).

What (small) positive difference could you make today? To yourself? To others?

Who could you give some time to?

What helps you to feel more alive?

How can you use your time?

How can you talk to yourself in a way that will be helpful?

### **Exploring values and value-informed actions**

What values do you want to be reflected in your behaviour?

How can you bring [value, e.g. kindness, courage, love] into your behaviour?

In what domain or aspect of your life? With whom?

On the other side of this, what would you like to look back on having done?

On the other side of this, what would you like others to say about you?

### **Encouraging self-compassion**

What would you say to a friend who said that?

If you wanted to be kind to yourself, what would you say?

How can you look after yourself in the coming days and weeks?

### **Exploring resources**

What do you have within you that is going to help you?

What are your strengths?

When have you achieved a success previously? How did you do that? What strengths and qualities did you draw upon?

Who do you have around you that can help?

Who can you connect with that might help?

Where can you find information? (signposting to a few useful links or sites might be helpful here)

### **Exploring options**

What options do you have?

What else might you try?

What have you done before in other situations?

What has worked for you in other contexts?

What have you seen others do that might help?

What have you thought about doing but not tried yet?

Would you like a suggestion? I don't know if this would work for you, but...[suggestion]. What do you think?

**Action planning**

Having had this conversation, what do you think you might do?

When will you do it?

What might you try in the next few days/weeks?

What barriers might you encounter?

Who else could help you to achieve this?

On a scale of 0-10, how committed are you to taking this action?

**Some messages that might be helpful (to be discussed or delivered with caution)**

This will pass.

There will be a point when you will not feel like this, when things will be different.

Some good might come from this.

**REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING**

---

Adams, M. (2015). *Coaching Psychology in Schools: Enhancing Performance, Development and Wellbeing*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Bachkirova, Cox & Clutterbuck (2014). *The Complete Handbook of Coaching (Second Edition)*. London: SAGE.

Bordin, E. S. (1979). The generalizability of the psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 16 (3): 252-260.

Gordon, T. (1970, 2000). *Parent Effectiveness Training*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Harris, R. (2008). *The Happiness Trap*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.

Harris, R. (2009). *ACT Made Simple: A Quick-Start Guide to Basics and Beyond*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Harris, R. (2020). FACE COVID: How to respond effectively to the Corona crisis. Retrieved from <https://e-tmf.org/practical-tips-for-mental-and-physical-health-in-the-covid-19-crisis/>

Miller, W. & Rollnick, S. (2002). *Motivational Interviewing (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition): Preparing People for Change*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Miller, W. & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition): Helping People Change*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Murphy, J. J. & Duncan, B. L. (2007). *Brief Intervention for School Problems: Outcome-Informed Strategies*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Palmer, S. & Whybrow, A. (Eds) (2007). *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A Guide for Practitioners*. Hove: Routledge.

Rogers, C. (1961). *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.