

## Workshop 16: Communicating our needs and feelings

Communicating our needs and feelings to other people can sometimes be quite difficult. When we live with a health condition we often need to communicate about things we need and also about how we are feeling to different people.

Our health condition may also change the way other people view us and may change the relationships we have with other people.

Perhaps we need to talk to colleagues about the impact our health condition has on our work or we might need to ask a family member for help.

What situations have you been in where you may have had to talk to other people about how your condition affects your life?

You may have had to ask someone for help, how did that feel?

If we get our communication right it can be very helpful in the way we manage our health condition. If we get it wrong it can lead to resentment, hurt feelings and frustration.

Helpful communication is more than just making yourself heard. It involves knowing what the message is that you want to get across.... and then working out how to get that message to the other person in such a way that they will be open to hearing it and will understand it.

Whilst the words we use are important, the way we use the words matters too.... our tone of voice and which words we stress.

Our bodies and faces also communicate things to other people. Sometimes when we feel worried or tense we can give the impression that we are feeling angry.

Even things we use to help with our health condition can give a message to other people.... things like a walking stick, a mobility scooter or an inhaler.

If we keep failing at getting the message across about what we need and feel, we might eventually give up trying and begin to feel that nobody understands or cares.

If we find we are getting our communication wrong, perhaps we could look at why this is so. Is the language we use unhelpful? Is our facial expression or body language not quite right?

Often a health condition is invisible to other people. If we aren't able to tell people how it feels and how it impacts on our lives, they will make their own assumptions about it.

How do we communicate non-verbally when we feel unwell?

Most of us use these signals occasionally, to draw the attention of someone else and to ask for their concern.

Sometimes this works for a while, people respond.... but eventually people stop noticing, or even ignore our signals. So we need to find different ways to communicate.

There are a couple of things we can try which can help us.

One way we sometimes get it wrong is by using language which blames the other person and leads to them becoming defensive. Perhaps you may hear this as we do this role-play.

### Role-play

Partner 1: You really don't get it, do you?

Partner 2: Rather than having a go at me, why can't you just make sure you are ready rather than lounging around?

Partner 1: You were the one who was in the bathroom for an hour.

Partner 2: Well, that's because you didn't tell me you needed it, I thought you were having a lie down.

### So, what did you notice?

The word YOU

Blame

Both become defensive

No attempt to listen

Nothing achieved

Certain words stressed

These were the negative phrases:

You really don't get it do you?

You were the one who was in the bathroom for an hour

That's because you didn't tell me you needed the bathroom

### **Can you rephrase any of these?**

Using 'I' rather than you is less blaming and helps the other person to be less defensive and able to understand your point of view rather than feeling attacked.

The aim of good communication should be mutual understanding and finding a solution where both people feel happy with the outcome, it is not about one person 'winning' the argument but both of them benefiting.

Helping other people to understand something of our experience of living with a health condition is difficult, but finding the right time and the right words can help us. If we get it wrong the first time, don't give up - try something different the next time.

## **How did the patient and the doctor benefit from this agenda-setting?**

- Patient could voice concerns right from the start
- GP could manage the time
- Patient and clinician were equal in process
- Patient's feelings were valued
- More like a discussion, where ideas were shared
- More useful and relevant for both

To help us to take part in the agenda setting process we may need to give some thought beforehand to what we might wish to talk about.

## **We may want to use these questions to guide us:**

What am I going to this meeting for and what do I hope to get from it?

How have I been feeling since my last visit?

What have I been finding difficult?

What else in my life might be affecting my health?

What have I been doing to look after my health?

Is there anything I might find difficult to talk about?

What is my goal?

There are times when both the health professional and the patient are not able to do justice to all issues in just one appointment. If this is the case you may need a follow-up appointment where other topics can be discussed.

If you decide to prepare beforehand for your meetings so that you can contribute to setting the agenda, it is likely to make your meetings with health professionals more helpful and satisfying and enable you to feel that you are working with them in a more equal way. It may be that your health professional is also taking part in similar training and will also be learning more about sharing and agreeing the agenda with patients.

Agenda setting is another tool which enables us to feel balanced and in control of our situation. Agreeing the agenda for a consultation helps us to become real partners in our health care. Many health professionals in the area are participating in training similar to this. Agenda setting is a new skill for us and it's also new for health care professionals.... and, like any new skill, they too may need to practise this.

Being a good self-manager always means we need to have a helpful understanding of our health condition. There are many questions you may want to ask. Here is a list of some that other people have come up with:

- **What are the tests for?**
- **How and when will I get the results?**
- **Who do I contact if I don't get the results?**
- **What will happen next?**
- **Who do I contact if things get worse?**
- **Where can I get more information or find a support group?**
- **What other ways are there to treat my condition?**
- **How long will the treatment last?**
- **What will happen if I don't have any treatment?**
- **Is there anything I should stop or avoid doing?**
- **What can I do to self-manage?**