

Communication Skills for Gatekeepers

There are communication skills that a gatekeeper can use to encourage the at-risk person to talk about suicide and to persuade them to seek help. These include:

- The skill of asking questions
- The skill of listening
- The skill of attending (use of body language)

The Skill of Asking Questions

The ability to ask the right kind of questions will help you to:

- Encourage a person to talk about their feelings or share their story.
- Focus a conversation around specific concerns.
- Move a conversation closer to achieving solutions.

Use *open-ended questions* to encourage individuals to speak more freely and at greater length about the problems they face that are motivating them to commit suicide. Open-ended questions tend to begin with “What...”, “How...”, or “Why...”. Examples of open-ended questions include “How have you been feeling lately?” “What has been happening in your family?” “How is everyone getting along at home?” “How are things with your husband/children?”

Typically, open-ended questions are most appropriate at the beginning of a conversation. As the conversation progresses, try using closed questions to produce a specific agreement or plan.

Use *closed questions* to help persuade the person to seek help. Closed questions can be answered with a specific statement, often a *yes* or *no*.

Closed questions might begin with “Did you...”, “Are you...”, “Can you...”, “How many...”, “When are you...”, or “Where are you...”. Examples of closed questions include: “Can you talk to your daughter about this?” “How long have you not been feeling well?”

The Skill of Listening

Effective listening will help you to:

- Concentrate on what others are saying to facilitate a shared understanding and agreement about what needs to be done.
- Determine goals and action times.

How to be a good listener:

- DO use a warm, relaxed tone of voice.
- DO use questions to encourage others to say more.
- DO keep your own comments to a minimum. Remaining quiet and allowing the other person time to speak is the most important listening skill.

Use these specific listening skills to show that you understand what the speaker is saying:

Paraphrasing: Briefly restate in your own words the information the speaker has communicated. This gives the individual a chance to find out whether he or she is being heard correctly. Good paraphrasing sentences often start with a phrase such as “So what I hear you saying is...” or “So what I think you are saying is.....”

Reflective listening Briefly restate in your own words the feelings communicated by the speaker. It tells them that your intention is to understand what they said and how they felt. Reflective listening can be especially useful when talking with a person who is very emotional and thinking about committing suicide. Use a phrase such as “So it sounds like you are feeling...”

Barriers to Effective Listening

Try to avoid these barriers to effective listening.

- Instead of letting the other person finish speaking, we interrupt. **Don't interrupt.**
- Another common listening barrier is assuming you know what the other person is going to say even before she/he says it. **Don't assume.**
- We can't listen if we're busy rehearsing what we want to say. Some people craft whole conversations while appearing to listen. **Don't rehearse.**
- When we filter, we listen to some parts of the message and not others. We may also filter the message through our beliefs and values and so misinterpret what we've heard. **Don't filter.**
- If we prejudge someone as “crazy,” or “stupid,” we don't pay much attention to what they have to say. **Don't judge or label someone.**

The Skill of Attending (Use of Body Language)

Most messages we send out have three components: the words themselves, our tone of voice, and the body language we use. Did you know that:

- **7%** of communication is received/understood through **words**
- **38%** of communication is received/understood through **voice, tone, inflection**
- **55%** of communication is received/understood through **facial expressions and body language**

Attending is the use of body language to show you are listening. It is nonverbal communication that indicates that you are paying careful attention to the speaker.

Nonverbal communication (body language) includes:

- Position and posture
- Gestures
- Eye contact
- Facial expressions

People from different cultures often use body language in different ways. What is acceptable body language in one culture may be misunderstood or even insulting in another. It is impossible to be aware of all of the possible cultural differences in body language. However, here are some general recommendations that you can use when speaking with someone.

DO

- Position your body so you face the person you are speaking with
- Listen carefully while the person is talking
- Keep appropriate eye contact

DON'T

- Turn your back on the person
- Frown or look judgmental
- Shuffle papers or look at your watch while the person is talking