



SUPPORTING US IN CRISIS

Practical strategies for supporting
children and young people in
mental health crisis

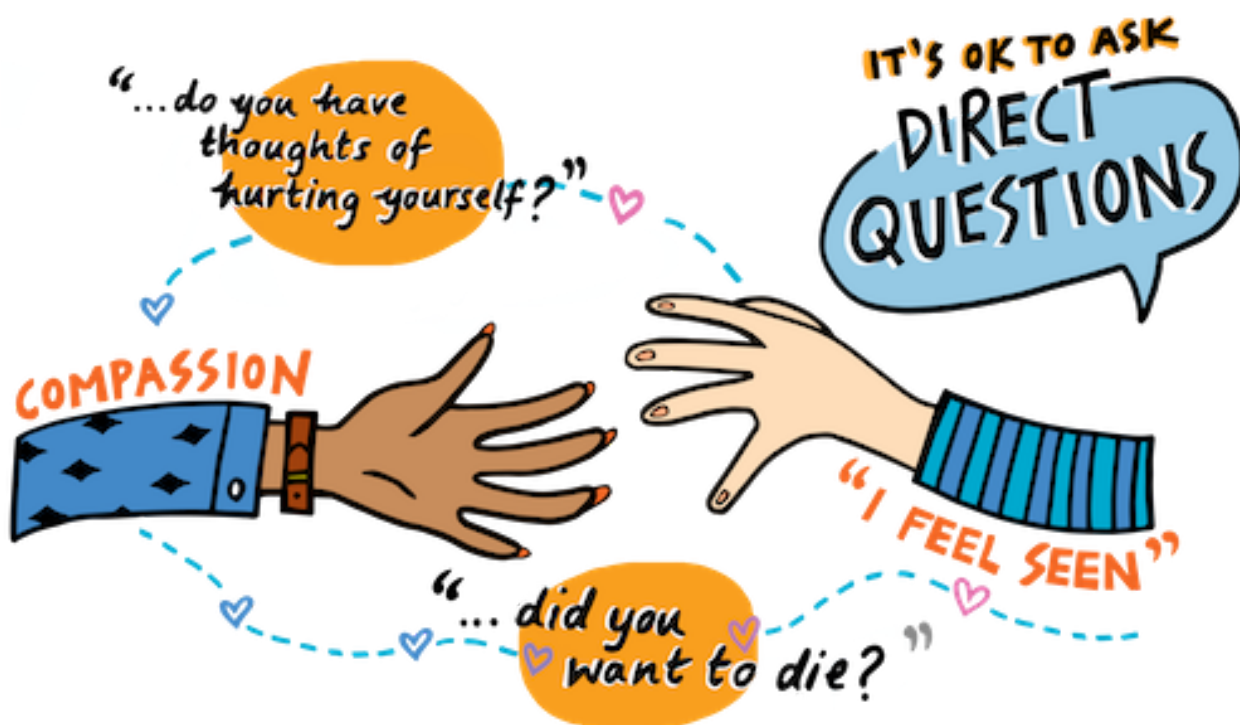


INTRODUCTION

Hi! Welcome to this **We Can Talk** resource we've put together to help you help us when we're in a mental health crisis. This document has been written by young people from across South East London who have our own lived experience of accessing support in a mental health crisis. So hopefully it will feel a little different from your standard policies and guidance.

We know that your job is not easy. Maybe it's a mixture of pressure, powerlessness, exhaustion and joy. But please, whatever you do, don't underestimate the positive difference even a short interaction you have with us can make. It can be the difference between whether we'll bother seeking support when we're desperate again in the future, or whether we feel that there are people out there who genuinely care about us and want us to get through this. And maybe that feels like pressure, but actually when we talked about what we needed most from you it was pretty simple - humanness and compassion.

But simple doesn't always mean easy so we've gone into more depth for you throughout this document. Part 1 is about these qualities we look for in someone supporting us in a crisis (the most important bit - if you ask us) and part 2 is about useful resources and signposting info.



QUALITIES WE LOOK FOR IN PEOPLE SUPPORTING US

Overall, what we want most of all is just normal you - not a robot with a script, or an expert with 10,000 letters after their name - but someone who's there for us as another human being at the end of the phone or in a service when we're going through a rubbish time. But we've broken down what this might look like a bit below:

Respect us

We're not just problems to be solved, or fragile children. We're whole human beings who probably have friends, family and things that we used to or still do enjoy, interests and dreams. We may not be able to see that right now, but maybe you can for us. Talk to us like that is the case! We're not so different from you even though we might be younger and going through an awful time. Remember that often we have expertise in what helps us, so try to respect that and draw that out of us rather than rushing to fix stuff.

These are our problems, so help us figure out how we want to deal with them, rather than jumping to what you think we should do. It's OK to offer ideas of what might help but first ask if we want them, because sometimes it can feel like we're just being shut down.

"Some parts of my life feel broken, but I'm not a broken person."

"Let's just have a conversation, like how you would speak to someone of our age if you bumped into us on the street or you know them in another situation. You can talk to us in that way in this setting as well."

Care about us

What do you look for when you go to a friend, partner or colleague struggling with something massive? Most people just want to feel cared about and heard and we can't stress enough that **that is what we want to**. But the system often rushes in with complicated pathways, analysis and professionals with important sounding titles. And of course, it's not that those things can never be important, but please just remember that we've probably made a massive step to call or turn up, so it can help for you to acknowledge that. Tell us you care, and then show us you care.

Especially, if we regularly call or come to A&E, we're often made to feel bad or like we're a wasting space - which can make us act out. But this may be the only place we feel like we get heard or cared about in the whole world. People often respond by wanting to take that away too, but surely it's a success that we are asking for support when we need it? Surely, it's on the rest of the system to sort out why we can only find that in crisis settings - not us?

"Some of us have family troubles where we never got to have a caring home environment. Sometimes showing us a place where we'll be properly cared for is extremely important in gaining that trust."

“With the therapist that I’ve got now, she does random things that are really, really nice, and I’ve never had that before. Like I brought in my flash cards because I was revising on the way to my session...and the next week, she brought in these old boxes that she had from her skincare stuff so I could put my flash cards in them...It was just so lovely and human. She wasn’t just being my doctor - she was trying to do little things for me that were really, really helpful and it meant so much.”

Be real with us

If there are limitations you wish you didn’t have but you do, tell us - we would much rather hear the truth about what you can offer us and it be upsetting than anyone making promises that they can’t keep and then us feeling like we can’t trust anything anyone says.

It helps us understand that you do care and want to help, but are limited by factors that are out of your control. If we’re angry - try to sit with that. Anger is a good thing - it means that we still believe we’re worth more. It’s worse when we can’t even be bothered to be angry anymore because we’ve already been let down too many times.

“Specialists I’ve had have been sensitive and caring, but honest with me about information that may be hard for me to hear...it was a real and honest experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.”

Similarly, if you wish the system were better or you think we’ve been let down by stuff like a lack of funding, be honest with us.

“My therapist told me about lack of funding when they were planning to refer me somewhere more specialised. They said I should get that care but it depends on funding and if they don’t have it we’ll have to do our best with a less specialised therapist. Obviously it felt kind of bad at first but it was way better to know it wasn’t her fault or because she didn’t think I needed help.”

“Discovering mental health campaigning and that there are loads of people who feel things need to change has changed my life. I guess for so long I’d blamed myself for being beyond help but actually I was in a system that can be really messed up at times.”

There’s also the topic of risk and confidentiality. In case you haven’t figured out the theme - be honest with us! Discuss it with us right from the start so it doesn’t come as a shock to us later on and end up feeling like a bit of a betrayal.

“A teacher at school didn’t tell me he needed to tell my head of faculty about something I’d told him, and when I realised from the questions he started asking me - I felt really betrayed. I would have been fine with it if I knew from the beginning but I felt lied to and then couldn’t trust what he said from then on”

Be sensitive to our situation

Remember to consider our basic needs, like checking if we're too hot or cold, need something to drink, or even offer if there's somewhere for us to freshen up. We often won't take you up on it, but it's a symbol that you care about us and are treating us like you would all your other patients. If you can, try and limit the possible negative impact of the surroundings we're in if they might be stressful for us, for example in a loud and busy A&E.

"It did a world of wonder when I was in hospital and I was offered these small things by a nurse. I connect with my physical environment and feeling cleaner had a knock on positive effect on my mental state."

"For some of us our phone is our lifeline - offering us a phone charger/portable charger in case we're worried about our phone dying would be amazing."

"In A&E I got put in a private waiting room with just me and my mum which was really helpful because I felt pretty guilty, stressed and self-conscious surrounded by little kids and families running around. It made me feel like they cared, understood and took me seriously."

Those are some ideas around our immediate surroundings, but try to think about our longer term situation too. For example, instead of assuming that we're in the situation we're in because we're incapable of looking after ourselves or taking responsibility, consider that, for some of us, we go into crisis because we've tried asking for help and been let down time and time again. You may only

speak to us once, but it's your job to advocate for us and what we may need and want but be unable to ask for anymore.

And finally, be yourself!

Be yourself - don't try to be our age, or patronise us. Just be alongside us, talking to us the way you would with any young person. We may be going through a lot of difficult things, but that's not all there is to us, so don't be afraid to talk to us about other things sometimes as well, or play a game with us to help distract us. Humour can be tricky to get right but most of us have developed really amazing dark humour through our struggles!

"When I'm in a really emotionally fragile state, I don't like being treated like a child. I want you to talk to me on a level...and I think it's made a world of difference when people have"

"Human interaction, like a joke halfway through, I've had that before and it's like, "Oh, this is funny, I may not hang up now. They're not joking about my situation, I can tell they're taking it seriously - they're just trying to help me feel comfortable which I appreciate"

Whew! That may seem like a lot of stuff, but just remember, it all comes back to the idea of humanness - we want to be treated, spoken to and considered as another human being, and often a lot of our fear comes from the fact we haven't been treated like that in the past. So it may take us a while to trust that you will be different.

SUPPORTING US BY PHONE?

Crisis line mental health support isn't easy to get right so we wanted to write a specific section for this. All of the above still applies but we've put some more specific tips.

This is what we saw as the Pros & Cons of phone support:

Pros

You can keep anonymity, which you can't in-person

You can call whenever and from wherever, including late at night - this can be safer than going alone to a hospital

It can be a good form of support in between main areas of support that you might have (friends/family, or treatments)

Parents don't have to get involved - you can call without needing parents/carers or them knowing, which can feel more comfortable

It doesn't matter how you look - sometimes in crisis you don't want to show yourself or the state that you're in physically

Covid has changed the way we think and behave - a phone call can be a way good way of staying connected and getting help you need in a crisis when you have limited resources due to restrictions

Cons

It can feel impersonal - there's no emotional connection to someone on the line who you don't know

Having to tell your story all over again can be tiring

The idea of being disconnected or your phone running out of battery/credit can be stressful and distracting

Can feel worried about the call going on records and bills

It can be difficult having people at home or in public places overhearing, especially if they aren't supportive or don't know about your difficulties
Using phone minutes/data/credit can be an additional worry

Ideas for addressing the Cons

- Try and be aware of the surroundings of the young person you're talking to - maybe even start by asking, "Is there anyone around you that's making you feel self-conscious about talking?"
- Use genuine affirmative sounds occasionally to show you're listening
- Offer alternatives for people struggling with calls - "If you're too anxious to carry on talking, here are some text services or web chats that you could use instead."
- Being on the phone can be quite impersonal, so the ability to chat/joke can be even more important in keeping us on the line. Another option is to have somewhere people can see a picture of the person they are talking to with a random fact about them, e.g. on the website
- Reassure from the start what could/will happen if they get disconnected. E.g. Can they call up again and speak to the same person? Will the service call back?
- Some of us prefer texting but then struggle with waiting for replies - let us know if that's an option and, if so, how long we might expect to have to wait for a reply
- Finally, acknowledge, acknowledge, acknowledge!
 - That someone might not have had good experiences with phone support in the past
 - That, for some people, being worried about technology being tracked or recorded can be a big part of their difficulties - check in about that if it seems like it might be the case and be honest about what monitoring does happen and why
 - That this might feel weird and that you are just a stranger to them
 - Overall, talking on the phone can be difficult - even just calling in can be a big deal for us and a barrier to overcome! So don't be afraid to acknowledge that, show your appreciation and ask if there's anything that could help us

INFO WE LOOK FOR FROM PEOPLE SUPPORTING US

We have included this section because it was a priority for the service commissioning us.

The fact that our priority (the **qualities** we look for in people supporting us) was different to the service priorities (tools, strategies and **signposting**), we got commissioned to do is reflective of the wider system and how it does and doesn't meet our needs. It can be easier to signpost and move someone on in distress rather than just sit with them and hear what they have to say, but that doesn't mean it's going to be what is most helpful.

So we want to include it with a bit of a warning...

Before you suggest anything, please

1. Ask us whether we want to hear ideas first and ask us about things we might have used in the past to get through these times.
2. Bring things up as possibilities rather than orders, acknowledging different things work for different people. Give us different options.
3. Consider our context.



Most of the negative experiences of crisis support we talked about with each other when writing this were to do with people jumping in with ideas that felt trite and patronising, before we felt ready to hear them. Sometimes we just want to be heard. It feels infinitely more approachable if we're actually given the choice of whether we feel like talking about ways of coping, rather than feeling like it's something being imposed on us.

If we are receptive to hearing some ideas, maybe try suggesting things as possibilities or something that's worked for you, rather than as something that we should or have to do. Sometimes it can feel pressurising or dismissive of our specific situation or experience to have someone tell us that something will work for us and we just need to try harder with it. Just acknowledge from the start that different things work for different people and that some people will love what others hate.

It can also help to offer multiple suggestions, checking, "Do any of those sound like they might be something you'd want to try?" and if not, and it feels helpful then trying to work closer towards something that might help us.

In addition, try and consider the context of the person you're talking to and what we might actually be able to do. This could literally be like what resources, space or activities we have access to, or figuratively, in terms of what we feel capable of trying or doing at this point in time given our emotional state. For example, if you can tell that I'm feeling emotionally quite sensitive and I tell you that something doesn't work for me, and I don't seem interested - just accept that and move on.

You will find the lists of useful services at the end of this document.

Useful Coping Strategies

Drawing on yourself instead of self-harming

Planning

"I find it quite therapeutic to figure out a plan to control the small parts of my life. I use the calendar on my phone and then find it useful to rewrite things out into a planner; this gives me both something to do with my hands as well as a bit of clarity for the mind."

Identifying and working through triggers

Having a fiddle toy/stress ball/keys to jangle etc.

Games

"For me personally, the game Tetris really helped me to calm down because of the action of moving things...keep an eye out on games/other entertainment things that people are into and find helpful."

Going on drives or walks alone or with someone

"Me and my Dad put on our favourite music and sing as loud as we possibly can - even if you're awful at singing like me it can still help."

"I just put on some clothes and get on a bus and go somewhere...I would just walk around and then go home again. It really helped me clear my head, and because there's so much going on around me, I wouldn't think any bad thoughts or anything."

Understanding the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing'

Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give

Move nights/TV series nights

(in person or virtually)

Spending quality time with people you love

Whether family, friends or significant others

Taking time out of your day, especially when stressed, to do 'nothing'

Spirituality

Meditation, tarot card reading, crystals

Faith and prayer

"Prayer can be like a form of connection and sorting through thoughts"

People talking to you about 'normal stuff' as distraction

"If I'm in a crisis, I call my dad and he just tells me about what the cats are doing...just trying to bring me back to reality and just remind me of all the normal things. Like, if he's had to run for a bus and the bus driver just went, "Screw you, I'm driving off," trying to make me laugh with little stories like that."

Temperature sensations

Putting an ice cube in your mouth, eating something with chillies, splashing your face with cold water

Cleaning

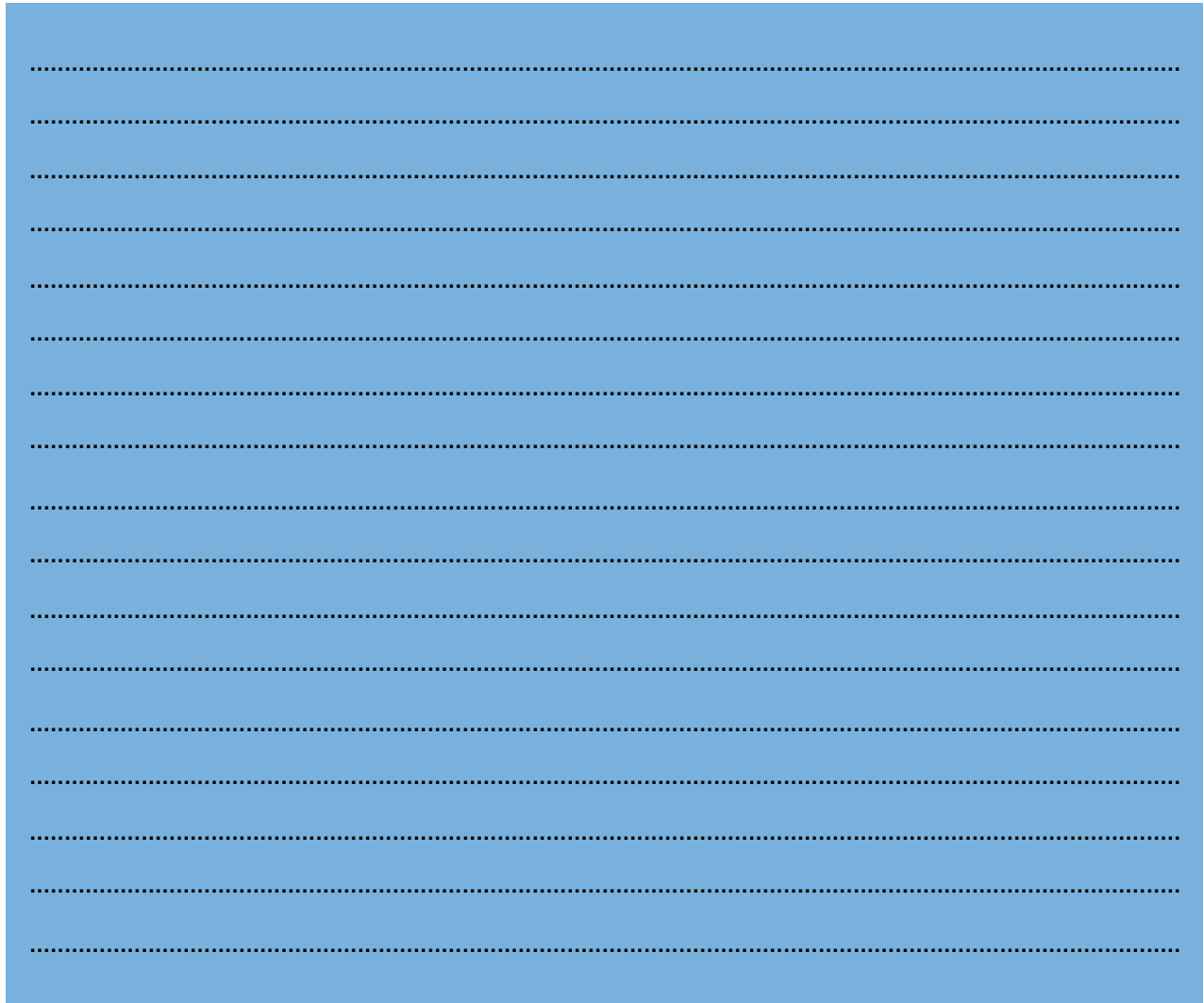
"I clean when I get stressed and when it's all done, it's a massive relief and it feels quite nice. It's like I get out all of my stress and my anger through the cleaning, and then when I'm done, I'm just like, this is great."



SELF CARE

So finally, what about you? You can't do any of these things unless you look after yourself as well! You're doing a really hard job, and we may not know exactly what that's like, but we do know about hard times - so maybe we can both learn from each other.

What are your go to ways to unwind after a difficult day at work? Write some of them down here (we've put some of our own ideas below as well!)

A large blue rectangular area with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

We recommend:

- Skincare and pampering (e.g. face masks)
- Watching your favourite show/movie
- Eating three meals a day (eat your favourite food!)
- Mindfulness
- Crying when you need to!
- Not having impossibly high standards - you're human too!
- Going on a small adventure
- Getting angry and saying where things need to be different
- Reading a book in the park
- Small connections with those you love - a quick text etc.

THANKS FOR READING!

If you're still reading this - congrats! Hopefully, you found our thoughts at least a bit helpful. For those of you who do care and trying your best despite the barriers we know can get in the way we just want to say that we're incredibly grateful and you deserve all the big ups! So thank you and remember the impact you can have!

This resource was coproduced with young people from across South East London on behalf of Our Healthier South East London Integrated Care System in October 2020.

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