

For families, partners & carers:

Effective communication

Communicating with others can sometimes be challenging. People with a personality disorder can be particularly sensitive to verbal and non-verbal (e.g. body language) communication. Remember that you are not always going to get it right.

Communicating effectively is challenging and may be further complicated by issues related to personality disorder, such as hypersensitivity. Whether you are communicating with a spouse, child, sibling, parent, friend or co-worker, effective communication is key to avoiding misunderstandings, misinterpretations and conflict. Here are some helpful tips to support effective communication:

BE CLEAR IN COMMUNICATION

People can be sensitive to wording and tone of communication, particularly when they are not feeling so good. Any indication of criticism, sarcasm, anger or rejection is likely to be reflected upon and intensified. Try to be as unambiguous, neutral and clear in your communication as you can. If your communication is misread, the person may respond with anger, humiliation or insecurity. Reflect on what you said (or did not say) and how you said it – it may help you communicate more effectively in the future.

ALLOW THE OTHER PERSON ROOM TO SPEAK

In all communication, it is important to allow the other person space to talk. If the person feels interrupted or cut-off they may perceive this as rejection or a form of aggression and respond by expressing anger, hurt or generally feeling as though you have not listened to them. Providing the person opportunities, including space and time, for the person to express themselves verbally can be particularly helpful.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Be aware of your own non-verbal communication to ensure that you are giving a clear overall picture of your intended message. Tone of voice, pace of speech and body language all combine to create a full picture of what you are trying to say. It is often helpful to keep tone of voice and facial expression neutral. Show that you are listening by maintaining eye contact, nodding, and being aware of (and minimising) any distractions that may be around you. Keep your hands in view so as to reduce suspicion or perceptions of aggression. All of these behaviours combine to help the person know you are genuinely interested in them and what they have to say.

TECHNIQUES TO AVOID

■ **Hiding frustration or anger** – It is common to hide anger or frustration to avoid potentially unpleasant reactions. Most people can pick up when someone is saying everything is OK but their body language suggests otherwise. People with personality disorder are particularly sensitive to incongruent messages and may experience heightened negative emotions when this occurs. Try not to hide your feelings or viewpoint. Discuss them in an open, clear, empathic and calm manner.

■ **Blaming** – It is normal to experience frustrations in life that can make us less aware of what is happening for other people. However, blaming or attacking others can tap into the person's perception of themselves as worthless or incompetent. It can be difficult for people who are sensitive to hear an insulting, blaming or attacking comment and not take it personally and for them to recognise it is a reflection of you having a hard time yourself. Try to minimise blaming and attacking in your communication

■ **“Yes, but...”** – It is normal to have different viewpoints when discussing concerns with others. In times like these, responding with “yes, but...” statements can elicit feelings of invalidation or rejection in the person. It can be helpful to avoid these statements and replace them with more neutral statements. For example, practice not adding the “but...” in your statements and instead wait to see what happens when you allow the person to verbalise their concerns and then you summarise or clarify what you understand their issue to be. After validating the person's viewpoint, it is then appropriate to discuss your own in a calm manner.

REMEMBERING YOUR RELATIONSHIP ROLE

As a family member, partner, parent, friend or co-worker it is unlikely that you will be able to consistently maintain good communication. Everyone occasionally slips up in their communication, which may result in an angry outburst or a misinterpretation. Remember that you are human too and you are not expected to get it right all of the time.

The Project Air Strategy acknowledges the major support of NSW Health. The Project works with mental health clinicians, consumers and carers to deliver effective treatments, implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries, and offers high quality training and education. Contact us at info-projectair@uow.edu.au or visit www.projectairstrategy.org