Communication

The role of communication in developing relationships and encouraging disclosure

First published 18 November 2021

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Communication – guideline introduction

Officers and staff should develop and use advanced communication skills to quickly establish trust, build rapport and encourage individuals to be open about their potential risk or vulnerability, including any experience of abuse.

Key skills include:

- building rapport
- active listening
- using a procedurally just approach, for example, being open, respectful and honest
- minimising biases and judgement
- awareness of internal motivations for disclosure

Applying these skills will help officers and staff develop a better understanding of relevant vulnerabilities, especially during the initial stages of information gathering and identification of risk.

While many officers and staff already have good communication skills, organisational support can help further enhance and maintain these skills. Find out more in the **professional development guideline**.

Communication skills are also covered in other guidelines. For example, see the **conflict management guidelines**.

Evidence summary

There is good evidence on the importance of effective communication in building a relationship with victims or vulnerable people to encourage the disclosure of abuse or harm. This includes language, building rapport and asking questions.

Interpersonal treatment, specifically the importance of sensitivity in interactions and a procedurally just approach, was strongly supported by the evidence.

The studies in this guideline

The evidence was based on 102 studies. Of these, 31% were based in the UK and 66% were based on interviews with victims of domestic abuse and serious sexual offences. Practitioners identified communication as an important factor when developing a relationship with the victim and encouraging the disclosure of abuse or harm.

The 101 studies included in this guideline originate from the following thematic evidence summaries: interpersonal treatment (68 studies); bias and preconceptions (65 studies); fairness and process (53 studies); communication (44 studies); victim empowerment (22 studies). Numbers may not add up due to an overlap of studies across multiple themes.

Empirical evidence
Good

Practitioner evidence
Available

Building rapport

Building rapport with individuals was shown to be important in eliciting information and encouraging the disclosure of abuse or harm for all vulnerabilities.

Practitioners described rapport as 'building a human connection', 'developing a relationship' and 'encouraging trust'. It was suggested that building rapport takes time and can be improved by consistency of support when there is a series of encounters, both in terms of the approach and the number of different staff involved.

In relation to children in particular, police need to avoid appearing as intimidating or as authority figures.

Practitioners felt that rapport building was vital in developing a relationship with an individual that enabled the disclosure of information and allowed the collection of a more complete picture of the situation.

Practical advice for developing relationships and rapport

Practitioners highlighted the importance of creating a safe space and developing a relationship to encourage the sharing of information. Investing time, providing space and building trust were considered vital to building good relationships.

Practical examples of this included:

- offering drinks, tissues, breaks and a seat
- giving them time to think
- offering encouragement
- offering alternatives, for example, a female or male officer
- offering interpreter services
- offering independent advocacy, such as an independent domestic violence advocate (IDVA), independent sexual violence advocate (ISVA) or specialist service provider
- considering the impact of attending a police station and being sensitive to the situation
- managing their expectations
- developing a dialogue and using language they understand
- demonstrating a genuine interest in them
- demonstrating empathy and compassion
- listening actively

Barriers to effective communication included:

- taking everything at face value and not reading between the lines
- asking questions by rote or parroting back answers
- interrogating the individual
- not recognising peculiarities in language or content

To improve communication, practitioners recommended:

- adapting the language to the person and situation
- having an approachable manner
- showing compassion and empathy
- having awareness of body language and non-verbal cues (not just the individual's but also their own)

- monitoring their tone of voice
- being sensitive and patient
- maintaining professional boundaries

Language and explaining processes

Although building rapport has been shown to be important, there is little information in the research on what this means in practice, and techniques for building rapport vary considerably.

The use of appropriate language is known to contribute to building rapport. Officers and staff should ensure that:

- they use the individual's preferred terminology – for example, survivor
- they use gender-inclusive language – for example, avoiding misgendering or dead naming (the use of the birth or other former name of a transgender or non-binary person without their consent)
- they avoid jargon and don't assume prior knowledge of the criminal justice system
- relevant facilities and support services are available for individuals who may require them – for example, interpretation and translation services

Ensure that actions and processes are properly explained. This could include what at-risk individuals can expect to happen, what follow-up information they might receive and who else might have to be involved. Guideline committee members considered this to be an important factor in the fair and respectful treatment of an individual.

Further information about verbal and non-verbal communication can be found in the **conflict management guidelines**.

Hints and tips from existing guidance

Verbal communication

- Introduce yourself, ask the person their name and use it.
- Use open questions to engage the person.
- Explain why you are taking the action you are.
- Be honest about what is going to happen next.
- Speak clearly, use simple language, avoid using jargon and slang, and check understanding.
- Minimise the number of people needed to deal with the situation.

Non-verbal communication

- Allow the person time to speak.
- Be aware of your own non-verbal signals and the potential impact this may have on encouraging disclosure.
- Stay silent during pauses or make simple sounds (not words) to encourage the witness to continue.

Active listening

Active listening lets the individual know you have heard and understood them.

It can be done by repeating back to the witness what they have just communicated, taking care not to inadvertently approve or disapprove of the information just given.

Active listening and open questioning also demonstrate an interest in the individual and their circumstances.

Hints and tips from existing guidance

- Be open, receptive, unbiased and fair, and avoid making assumptions.

- Stand or sit at a comfortable distance from the person and slightly side-on to promote cooperation.
- Look at the person to show you are listening.
- Make it clear that you have plenty of time for the conversation.
- Use open questions to encourage conversation.
- Use pauses appropriately to allow the person to respond.
- Nod your head to indicate understanding or to encourage the person to keep talking.
- Listen to the whole message, taking notice of the person's use of words, tone and body language.
- Paraphrase what they have told you and check understanding.
- Show empathy and demonstrate understanding.

Using a procedurally just approach

Research on procedural justice has highlighted that positive interactions with individuals can be supported by officers or staff (Mazerolle and others, 2013). This includes:

- giving people a 'voice', letting them tell their side of the story, and listening
- making impartial decisions and explaining how they were reached
- showing trustworthiness by being open and honest
- treating people with dignity and respect

Findings from the research evidence suggested some victims found it empowering to be listened to and to give their account in their own words. The importance of empowering victims by giving them as much control as possible over the process and choices in how to proceed was also emphasised.

Hints and tips from existing guidance

Promoting procedural justice in practice may include:

- offering people the chance to ask questions and responding to what they say
- explaining how processes work
- explaining how decisions are made before a process starts and what is considered
- summarising and paraphrasing what people say to assure them they have been heard
- explaining reasons behind decisions
- making a conscious effort to be approachable and not intimidating

People might feel their treatment is not procedurally just when:

- procedures or use of authority feels automatic, with little explanation, personal engagement or collaboration
- procedures that have an impact on people are seen as a tick-box exercise
- reasons for decisions are superficial or lead to more questions
- it's not clear why a process or rule exists

Minimising bias and preconceptions

Practitioners identified the importance of minimising personal biases and preconceptions, as these were considered a major barrier to the effective disclosure of information. They noted aspects such as:

- poor demeanour or attitude towards the individual by first responders

- frustration with repeatedly having to give statements
- subjective personal bias
- unconscious bias or judgement in relation to the individual's behaviour, personal characteristics or circumstances, including awareness of compassion fatigue and desensitisation to scenarios being particularly relevant

Awareness of internal motivations for disclosure

It is important to be aware of the potential internal motivations that may encourage individuals to disclose information. Internal motivations may include:

- to help catch the perpetrator and have them prosecuted – for retribution or justice or to send a message
- validation – to have a voice and be heard
- moral or ethical obligations – to protect others, a sense of duty
- to protect themselves
- being ready to leave the abuser
- reaching a breaking or turning point where they've had enough, sometimes triggered by an escalation in abusive behaviour
- the impact of the abuse on others, especially children
- being persuaded by or receiving an 'extra push' from others

Tags

Vulnerable people   Evidence-based policing   Risk