

The Health and Adult Services (HAS) directorate is committed to a workplace culture that is based on respect. Whether working alongside colleagues or with members of the North Yorkshire public, every member of staff has a right to feel safe, valued and respected.

Managing difficult or abusive phone calls and interactions with members of the public can be challenging. People told us how important it is to have the support from colleagues, line manager and team before, during and after difficult conversations. We asked people to share their Top Tips on how to look out for each other and be there for colleagues who might need a bit of support. We have put these in two sections: In the office and Working remotely

In the office

People told us that it is easier to manage difficult conversations in the office than at home. This is because of things like:

Quiet, private places to work

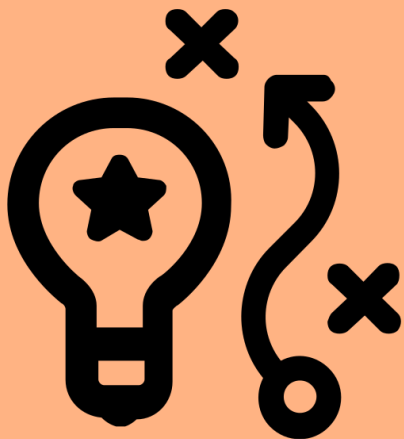
Support from colleagues and line managers

Access to the right equipment like monitors and work telephones

Being in a professional workplace environment

Even with all these things in place, it is still good to think about practical steps that teams can do to help prepare for, manage and respond to challenging situations.

Share & Prepare



Depending on the task, it might be possible to anticipate difficult calls and interactions. For example you might be returning a call or contacting a number of people about the same issue.

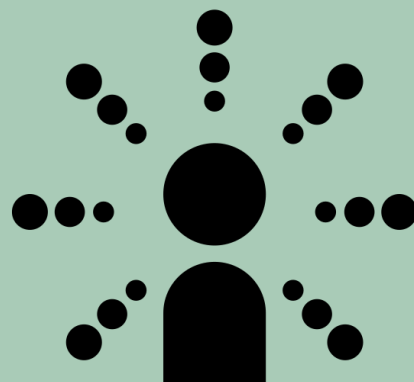
If you think that there might be challenges ahead, you might:

- tell a colleague or your line manager so they are aware
- rehearse or role play the call first
- think about the approach / language you're going to use
- be clear about the context of the call
- share relevant experiences of difficult conversations
- do some team coaching and mentoring (if appropriate)

Be aware and be available

Supporting each other as a team starts with being aware of how colleagues are feeling and what tasks lay ahead.

- Be aware of any impending difficult call/visit/meeting
- Offer your support, recognising that some people may not initially feel that they need help
- Offer to sit by them or join the call to listen.
- Offer reassurance during the call.
- Get someone a drink if the call is going on for a while



Be in the background



Supporting someone does not mean taking over. It means being available if needed, and doing just enough to give colleagues confidence they are not alone.

- Listen first: stay quiet.
- Don't jump in and interrupt unless you are asked to do so.
- Support can be just mouthing "Are you OK?"
- Use MS Teams to send a message during the call
- Afterwards, encourage colleagues to take a step back and reflect to see if things look any different.

Create timeout opportunities

Pausing a conversation can be a good way to take some of the tension out of a situation or get more information.

- Don't be afraid to put someone on hold to ask a colleague a quick question.
- Be clear to the caller about what you are doing, for example "I'd just like to check this out with a colleague. Is that ok?"
- If no one is available, use the time to look answers up
- Offer to call back if you need more time.



Managers, be ready for escalation



The presence of a manager can help colleagues feel supported in challenging situations.

- As a manager take the call/attend the visit /meeting if you feel that that is required.
- A challenging conversation is a learning opportunity. Find a balance between being available and taking over.
- Recognise that your presence, or listening in, may make some people more anxious

Step away

Challenging situations can be physically and emotionally tiring. Taking some time out afterwards can help you to recover.

- Take time away from other calls and demands, so you can process what happened
- Ask someone in your team to cover if needed/appropriate
- Move away from your desk and work area if possible
- Brisk exercise can help you recover and move on
- Depending on the conversation and/or time of day, suggest taking an



Debrief



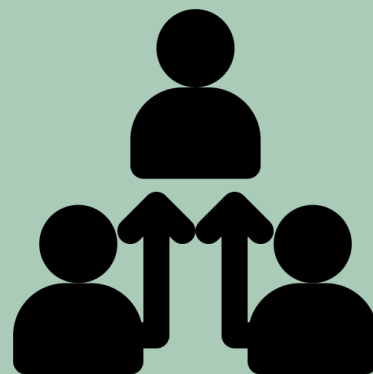
Talking about what happened with colleagues can be a useful way to process a difficult exchange. Make time for each other and find ways to learn together.

- After a call / meeting, ask colleague(s) if they are OK and if they would like to talk.
- Raise any concerns with manager soon after difficult calls
- Managers, be clear you will be available as soon as possible and build this into your day.

Follow up

Some situations may affect people's confidence to do their job. Don't leave situations unresolved or unaddressed.

- Establish regular peer / team conversations, especially where difficult calls are a regular part of the job
- Encourage ongoing training and use of development resources e.g. giving and receiving feedback, difficult conversations
- Encourage use of wellbeing resources
- In the case of regular issues or persistent complainants, talk about ways to address and manage ongoing concerns



Working remotely

People told us that one of the things that makes it hard to manage difficult conversations when working from home is not having the support from colleagues. These are some Top Tips people shared on ways to support each other with difficult calls and situations if you are working away from the office.

Acknowledge the challenge of remote working



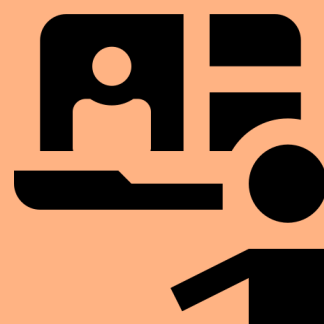
The increase in remote working has had many benefits for flexible working. There have also been some challenges. Talk as a team about these changes and how you can support each other.

- "In the office there are more opportunities for natural 30 second or 2 minute chats whilst working."
- "I think it is harder to get a bit of 'distance' at home."

Prepare yourself and prepare together

Even if you are working from home, it is important to work as a team. Find ways to catch up virtually to plan ahead.

- "Discuss ahead of the call and have debriefs afterwards."
- "Set out the parameters of the call first. This can be done conversationally – 'so what we are trying to do is X'"
- "I try to avoid the emotion in these calls it tends to drive the [poor] behaviour."
- "[I always feel] I am supported before difficult conversations, whether this is going over what needs to be said or just reassurance."



Be available



Let colleagues know you are available, and that you are happy to get a text, email or direct message to assist.

- “I ensure colleagues know [I am] accessible and offer support / prompts via Skype before during and after the call”
- “I prep with a colleague if [I am] aware that [one of us is] going into a tricky meeting or call.”

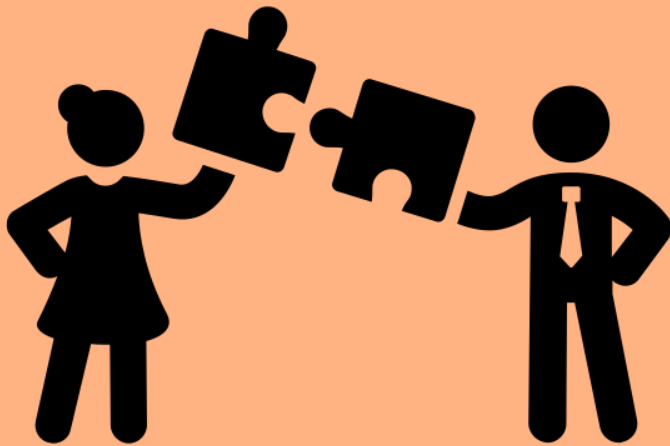
Buddy up

Reaching out to each other and finding a buddy can take the stress out of difficult situations.

- “Ask colleagues ‘are you free’ [and] buddy up for support”
- “I make myself available for support and debrief”.
- “We ring each other through the day to check on each other as I am aware our manager wants to support us as much as she can when struggling.”
- “I take responsibility to ring someone myself if [I am] feeling stressed after a call / email exchange.”



Work together where appropriate



Two heads can sometimes be better than one. Talk together and agree if it is better to have back up from a colleague

- “[I have] occasionally joined a call – sometimes having another person can prevent the call escalating or defuse the situation”
- “[I would] possibly ask colleague to come too if [the] issue has relevance for them or I just need support.”
- “[I] would ask the person if [this is] ok to bring someone else in and make the reason about me e.g. “they have a bit more expertise around [a certain topic].”

Debriefing, however you can

As in the office, talking about what happened can be a way to process difficult interactions. Find ways to do this remotely.

- “Ensure time is given to rationalise and evaluate the call.”
- “I make it clear that I am happy to be contacted to debrief.”
- “I have a very supportive head of service and manager. If they know I had a difficult conversation / meeting we will debrief via Skype / Teams.”
- “I Skype with colleagues and support them by listening to the situation”



Recovery time



Colleagues told us that stepping away and making time to reset is harder when working at home but still important.

- “Move away from your desk to take some time out”
- “Have a cuppa and a breath - use mindfulness for a break”
- “Walk around the block or even house in bad weather”
- “talk to the dog or cat (if you have one!) if no one is free”
- “I listen to music for ten minutes”
- “Take half an hour to go outside and have some fresh air to get distance from the situation.”
- “Manager [should make it] clear that [it is] ok to have a break after a difficult transaction e.g. make a coffee, go outside for 5 mins, [or] ring someone.”

Keep in touch

People talked about the importance of regular catch ups across the whole team. This should not just be when people have had difficult conversations, but whenever teams are remote working over long periods.

- “[I make myself] available to touch base each day to check in ‘how are you?’”
- “I take a virtual ‘walk’ around the county to check on my individual team members, not just my managers, talking about non work”
- “I have ‘met’ colleagues’ children, partners, dogs, cats etc. I bring them into the conversation and say what I am up to as well”
- “I encourage people to put their cameras on so faces can be seen.”
- [Create a] regular team meeting space.
- “We have team meetings daily to discuss any issues we have or anything we want to discuss.”



Further resources

For more information about the Respect Initiative and further resources, check out the HAS ‘Respect in the workplace’ initiative intranet page and the HAS Practice Library.

