

WHAT STOPS US FROM LISTENING?

Our own experiences

Think back to the first exercise when you were drawing a cat. At the point when you guessed it was a cat it became easier to draw, as you then had a mental picture of where you were going. If, however, you had then been told to draw a third front leg, it would have been difficult to do, as from your own experience cats don't have three front legs and so what you would be being told to draw wouldn't fit your own experience. The same can be true of any call.

We naturally try and make sense of what a caller is telling us by relating to our own experience – this can inevitably lead to us guessing where the call will go. If the caller suddenly says something that does not fit the mental picture you are developing, it can be tempting to disregard what the caller says. It is important that we are aware of this risk and actively avoid falling into this trap.

Our own prejudices

We have talked about the importance of trying to see the world from the caller's point of view. Consider for a moment talking to someone who holds views totally opposed to your own. Imagine if your son were gay and you took a call from someone who talked about how he hated 'queers' and how he has been involved in 'gay bashing'. Would you really want to try to stand beside him and understand what leads him to feel like this? Would you want to see the world as he sees it? A world where it is acceptable to discriminate and attack just because someone is different? The reality is that not many people would want to do this – but as Samaritans, we have to be willing to do so.

We do not have to condone what a caller has done, but if we are to truly offer the accepting, non-judgemental emotional support that we promise, we must be willing to put ourselves in such uncomfortable situations. This is why we need a support structure around us, so that we can go there, but safely come back. We will be talking more about this support structure in Session 4.

WHAT STOPS US FROM LISTENING? continued

Our own state of mind

Samaritans are human beings – we can only support our callers effectively if we are in the right state of mind to do so. If we come on shift having walked straight out of a major argument with our partner, we cannot expect to be able to support a caller immediately. If we have taken an intense call, we cannot expect to switch off straight away and move on to the next call.

It is important that we use our branch support structure to unload any feelings and emotions that will hinder our ability to connect with our next call. Accept that you are human and that you will need to do this – do use the support structure, as this is the only way you will be able to support callers effectively. We will explore this more in Session 4.

Time

If we are aware that we don't have the time to devote to a caller, we will not connect with them – we will not be willing to get alongside them and share all that they are going through, as we will constantly be jumping back to our own perspective, watching the clock and thinking, "How do I end this call?"

It is vital, therefore, that we avoid making arrangements for immediately after a shift. You might receive a call 30 minutes before the end of your shift, but this call might need to last for two hours – we have to have that time available.

Environmental factors

Noise and distractions will stop you listening effectively to a caller. Branches can be noisy places – don't be afraid to signal people to be quiet – the most important person in a branch at any time is the one who is supporting the caller – and that gives you the right to ask anyone else to be quiet!