

COMMUNICATION

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT AND IMPROVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

WHAT QUALITY OF LIFE MEANS FOR ME

PURPOSE

To enable individuals to express what is important to them.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A whiteboard or flipchart, pens and paper.

WHAT TO DO

Explain that quality of life includes the right for everyone to live life in the way that they wish without harming other people. To do this we need to look forward to the future and communicate to our families and friends what we want and how we wish to live.

1. Ask group members to discuss and say what is important to maintain a good quality of life. The suggestions can be written on a whiteboard or flipchart. This might include being able to:
 - » Maintain dignity
 - » Be respected
 - » Practise their faith
 - » Have companionship
 - » Stay independent
 - » Make own choices
 - » Be secure
 - » Take part in family life
2. Now hand out paper and pens and instruct participants to think for a moment and list three things which they want in future as part of their life. They can start with the words:

Three things I want in the future are:

- (a)
- (b)
- (c)

3. When completed, invite each group member, in turn, to share at least one of their wishes. As they share them, ask if this is something they can achieve for themselves or if they will need assistance. Discuss. Encourage other group members to suggest ways in which they might ask for assistance to help carry out their wishes.

COMMENT

Many of the things people want in order to maintain their quality of life are fairly simple and straightforward to put in place, and it can make such a difference to their lives.

STARTING CONVERSATIONS

PURPOSE

To encourage individuals to develop new relationships and gain confidence opening conversations.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A whiteboard or flipchart and markers.

WHAT TO DO

Begin by facilitating a discussion about the type of situations in which individuals find it difficult to initiate conversations. Note these on a whiteboard or flipchart so everyone can see them. They will come up with statements such as:

- » Discussing something that has happened in the news
- » Asking a question about the other person
- » Giving a compliment
- » Commenting on what is going to happen during the day
- » Talking about something that has happened to them
- » Talking about something new they are going to do
- » Asking someone how they are
- » Discussing something they have just done

When you have listed a fair number of situations, divide the group into pairs or small subgroups. Give two or three listed situations to each subgroup. Instruct them to write down the subjects and discuss suggestions for opening sentences that would help start a conversation or keep it going in those circumstances. They can use flipchart sheets to do this. Suggestions might include:

How are you feeling today?

My name is...

Today I'm going to...

I'm starting to find it difficult to...

Wasn't the flooding shown on TV last night terrible?

I feel a bit down today. My son has...

I didn't sleep well. I would like you to...

That's really interesting. Can you tell me...?

When a set time has passed, get each subgroup, in turn, to show their flipchart sheets and share both their situations and the conversation solutions they have discussed. The sheets can be displayed on the walls.

Next, ask people to select another partner. Then instruct them to practise starting up a conversation using a combination of any of the suggestions for subjects to talk about and the opening sentences. After a few minutes, stop the proceedings and ask them to move on to a new partner. They then use a different subject and opening sentence. Move people on to new partners three or four times.

Finally, assemble everyone in a circle and ask them how the conversations went. How did they feel? How could the conversations be improved?

COMMENT

There are many reasons why older people may find it difficult to open conversations. These may include:

- » Being withdrawn and isolated
- » Feeling they have little or nothing to contribute
- » Disliking asking for help
- » Loss of confidence
- » Being unable to hear properly
- » Feeling angry
- » Feeling stigmatised

Often individuals will need assistance overcoming these obstacles. You may need to discuss and identify with each person what their particular difficulties are and address them.

PICTURE CHARADES

PURPOSE

To communicate non-verbally, work with others to solve problems and have fun.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A whiteboard or flipchart and a marker, or drawing paper and felt tip pens. It is also helpful to have a list of animals or creatures in mind for individuals who have difficulty thinking on the spot. Examples might be: octopus, zebra, camel, lion, ant, elephant, alligator, kangaroo, butterfly, rabbit, moose, whale, cat, dog.

WHAT TO DO

Invite a group member to draw on the board the picture outline of an animal or creature. Other participants then try to guess what it is. The artist must not give any hints or clues to what they are drawing except to answer 'yes' or 'no' when the group tries to guess. Repeat this process with each member of the group until everyone has had a turn.

COMMENT

Other categories you could use are vegetables, flowers or famous landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower. If you use more difficult categories, such as landmarks or types of tree, it is useful to have pictures available for the artist to see as they draw. As an alternative, space participants a little distance apart and give each person a sheet of drawing paper, a felt tip pen and a slip of paper with a subject written on it for them to draw. When all the drawings are complete, each person, in turn, shows their drawing and the other group members guess what it is.

TALKING STICK

PURPOSE

To enhance group communication, create a format for uninterrupted disclosure and emphasise listening as a necessary part of communication.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A stick and some topics on which it is important that people express their opinions. Although you can use any sort of stick – even a ruler – it is best if it looks special. Colour and decorate it with feathers or ribbons. Topics can be around local issues, things in the news, TV programmes, issues in the day centre or home or topics participants want to discuss.

WHAT TO DO

Explain that the idea of a talking stick is taken from the custom of Native Americans. Elders use it when meeting to discuss important tribal issues. The stick is passed around the circle, allowing each person to speak and be heard without being interrupted. When holding the stick you can speak and put your point, observations or feelings across. When not holding the stick you listen and concentrate on understanding what is being said. There is no obligation to speak when holding the stick. (Make sure everyone understands this.) If you don't have anything to say, hold it briefly to see if anything comes to mind and, if not, pass it on. If time permits, pass the stick round the circle twice and then place it in the centre. Encourage anyone who has more to say to take the stick and speak and then return it to the centre. When people are holding the stick, allow periods for silence and reflection rather than rushing on to the next person.

Once everyone understands how the system works, introduce the topic to be discussed and start the process.

COMMENT

You can just pass the stick and ask each person to talk about anything that comes to mind, is causing them concern or they want to share. This can initiate some interesting sessions. You can also use the stick as a means of getting people to reflect on the session: 'Let's reflect on what we have done today' or 'What are you going to do differently as a result of what you have learned today?'

In groups with good cohesion and when trust has been established, people will usually share thoughtful and personal information. Being able to speak without being interrupted allows them to voice their innermost feelings and thoughts. People who tend to monopolise discussions may find it difficult remaining silent. You may need to discuss this at the end of the activity. Also, ask if anyone felt uncomfortable, and why.

IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS

PURPOSE

To work on listening skills as an aid to maintaining communication and social interactions.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A whiteboard or flipchart, a marker, paper and pens for the observers and some appropriate topics for participants to talk about.

WHAT TO DO

Explain that listening skills often diminish in older adults. This can be because of depression, worry, preoccupation with health problems or diminished hearing. However, maintaining listening skills is vitally important as a means of communicating and staying connected with others and the outside world. It is therefore well worth looking at current listening skills and how they might be improved.

Ask participants what they think obstacles to good listening are. Write the comments on the whiteboard or flipchart. These might include:

- » Constantly interrupting when someone is trying to say something
- » Standing too close to the person
- » Monopolising the conversation with what interests you
- » Looking bored and disinterested
- » Avoiding eye contact
- » Not checking or indicating you understand what is being said
- » Sighing and looking at your watch
- » Using a disinterested tone of voice

Follow up by asking them what they think helps when listening to someone. These might include:

- » Keeping good eye contact
- » Leaning forward slightly to indicate interest
- » Asking open-ended questions
- » Making reassuring comments such as 'Go on...', 'Tell me more...', 'That's interesting...', 'I can understand that...'

- » Showing concern and interest as appropriate in facial expressions
- » Checking you understand what is being said
- » Responding in an appropriate way
- » Keeping appropriate physical distance

After discussion, split the group into subgroups of three people. Instruct one member of each subgroup to talk about a topic while someone else listens. The third person observes and makes notes, listing what the listener does well and what could be improved. After a few moments the observer then gives feedback. All observers then move to another subgroup, taking on a different role. The same process is followed again with a new observer and listener. Observers keep moving to another subgroup each time so that eventually everyone has talked about a topic, listened, been an observer and had feedback.

Finally, bring everyone back together as one group and invite comments. Ask if anyone has learned about any good and bad listening habits they have exhibited.

COMMENT

It helps to give people topics they can talk about each time, such as:

- » Favourite meals, holidays, films
- » Getting married
- » Children's behaviour today
- » Retiring
- » Voting
- » A hobby
- » What makes them angry
- » Modern technology
- » Parenting
- » A recent outing

LET'S TALK

PURPOSE

To help people get to know each other better and get them talking.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No materials required.

WHAT TO DO

Split the group into pairs and decide who is going to be A and who B. Now instruct the As that they will have two minutes to talk to their partner and tell them something about themselves. They can talk about anything they want to: a job they have done, a hobby, a holiday, their family, where they were born, where they live, what they have done during the past week, what films or books they like, for example. After two minutes stop the proceedings and instruct the Bs that they now have two minutes to talk to their partner, telling them something about themselves.

After both partners have held a conversation ask all the As to move on to another B partner and go through the same process again. Continue until everyone has had an opportunity to talk to everyone else. Encourage participants to choose different topics to talk about each time they change partners.

When completed, bring everyone back together and ask:

- » Would anyone like to tell everyone about anything humorous, unusual or interesting (but not embarrassing) they have learned about one of their partners?
- » Have you enjoyed the conversations?
- » Have you got to know each other better?
- » Would you normally take such a short time to get to know everyone? If not, why not?

COMMENT

If limited for time you can shorten the activity by reducing the number of partner changes.

SKETCHES

PURPOSE

To provide an alternative way to express feelings, ambitions or to elicit information about difficult topics.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Drawing paper, crayons and pencils.

WHAT TO DO

Hand out the drawing materials and ask participants to sketch two pictures. One drawing should show how they are feeling now and the second how they would like to feel in a set time in the future – a week, a month or a year. The sketches can be diagrammatic, abstract or of a scene that illustrates their feelings. Emphasise that the pictures do not have to be well drawn. A black blob may illustrate feeling depressed or a smiley face feeling happy.

When completed, ask everyone to show their drawings and interpret them for the group. Other group members can ask questions to aid understanding. Any issues that emerge will need to be appropriately addressed.

COMMENT

You can use this in a variety of ways to enable expression. For example:

- » An ambition they had as a youth and an ambition now
- » How they feel in the group and how they would like to feel
- » Relationships with their family now and how they would like them to be
- » Something they are angry about and something that pleases them
- » A hobby they have done in the past and a hobby they would like to do now

You can make the subjects match the situations of individuals in the group.

SHOWING CONSIDERATION AND RESPECT

PURPOSE

To increase socialisation by showing consideration and respect to others.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A whiteboard or flipchart, a marker and some paper and pens or pencils. For the alternative you will require some large sheets of paper, a marker for each subgroup and some Blu Tack or similar to place the sheets on the wall.

WHAT TO DO

Explain that showing consideration and respect is an important part of enabling us to communicate well and build personal relationships. It helps us make friends, obtain help when we need it, enjoy companionship, get along with people we may not particularly like and prompts others to respect us.

Ask each person to reflect on their own behaviour and, in turn, state a way in which they have shown consideration and respect for other people in the past. This might be by:

- » Making an apology
- » Being tactful
- » Listening to some else's point of view
- » Complimenting someone else
- » Keeping appointments
- » Offering assistance
- » Respecting differences
- » Keeping a promise

Write the behaviours on a board or flipchart. Then, when everyone has contributed, invite group members to call out as many other behaviours which show good manners and respect as they can. Add these to the list on the board.

Give out some paper and pens or pencils and ask participants to reflect on their own behaviour and write down three ways in which they personally could show respect and consideration for others in their daily routine that they have been neglecting.

End the activity with everyone, in turn, stating one of the actions they are going to take to show consideration and respect to others.

COMMENT

Instead of writing a long list on the board (after each person states a way in which they have shown respect and consideration for others in the past), you could split the group members into two or three subgroups. Then give each subgroup a large sheet of paper and a marker pen and ask them to compile separate lists which they then place on a wall and present to the whole group.

IT'S THE WAY I SAY IT

PURPOSE

To encourage creative thinking and increase understanding of how to use body language as a way of communicating.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Pre-prepared slips of paper with a communication written on each and a bag, box or hat.

WHAT TO DO

Prepare a number of communications appropriate to group members written on slips of paper. Examples are:

- » I'm too hot
- » I'm cold
- » It's too noisy in here. I can't hear you.
- » My leg hurts
- » I feel nauseous
- » I need time to think
- » I'm happy here
- » Come with me to see the doctor
- » I want to go to sleep
- » I would like to see my grandchildren

Seat everyone in a circle and invite participants to choose a slip from the bag, box or hat. Each person then takes a turn in the middle of the circle and communicates what is written on their slip of paper using body language only.

When everyone has had a turn, lead a discussion on the difficulties of communicating and understanding body language. Ask questions such as:

- » Can you always tell what people mean by their expressions and gestures?
- » Do gestures and expressions have different meanings to different people?
- » Do people's expressions always match what they are saying when they speak?

- » Do any group members use gestures and expressions to communicate words they can't remember or things they have difficulty communicating?
- » What are the obstacles?

COMMENT

Because of some age-related loss of hearing, vision, memory and other cognitive abilities, practising using facial expressions, hand gestures, sign language and other non-verbal methods to convey meaning can become more important as one grows older.

SIMILES

PURPOSE

To enable expression of feeling, be creative, and have fun.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

No materials required.

WHAT TO DO

Explain that a simile is a figure of speech that compares one thing with another and usually uses the words 'as' or 'like'. For example:

...as scared as a mouse

...as cold as ice

...like a fish out of water

...like a bird basking in the sun

Ask participants if they can think of a few other examples, then invite individuals to express how they feel by making up a simile using the word 'as' or 'like' involving a living creature such as an animal, a fish or a bird. Each person, in turn, states their simile beginning:

'I feel _____ (as brave as a lion).'

'I feel _____ (like a bear with a sore head).'

After a round, ask people if they would like to change their simile to one that someone else has used and which matches how they feel more accurately.

Next, have a round of people using a simile to state how they would like to feel. If they are happy with their previous simile they can restate it, or they can make up another.

End by talking about the similes chosen. Did anyone change them? Why? Did they feel any different after changing them?

COMMENT

Instead of using living creatures you could use similes involving flowers or vegetables.

OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

PURPOSE

To enable individuals to identify ways of overcoming communication barriers.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Copies of the handout 'Overcoming Communication Barriers', paper and pens or pencils.

WHAT TO DO

Explain that the purpose of the activity is to identify ways of overcoming communication barriers. Then divide the group into pairs or subgroups of three or four people. Give each person a copy of the handout 'Overcoming Communication Barriers' and a pen or pencil. Tell the subgroups that they have fifteen minutes to discuss and come up with solutions to each of the problems listed.

After fifteen minutes invite each subgroup to give feedback on their ideas to the whole group. Identify the best solution for each problem and then ask, 'Why don't we do these things automatically?'

COMMENT

You can also ask participants if anyone has come across other obstacles to good communication and discuss ideas to overcome them.

HANDOUT: OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Barrier	Suggestions to make it easier to communicate
You or the person you are talking to is feeling very stressed.	
There is a lot of noise around you.	
The person does not appear to be listening or does not respond to what you are saying.	
The person has a strong accent.	
The person is speaking very slowly or softly.	



Barrier	Suggestions to make it easier to communicate
You, or the person you are speaking to, has a hearing impairment.	
The person keeps using jargon or technical words you don't understand.	
The person keeps standing uncomfortably close to you.	
The person keeps speaking too fast for you to understand.	
You, or the person, is too tired to concentrate.	
You, or the person, is very angry or emotionally upset.	
The person is sitting down or in a wheelchair and you are standing.	



