



Simple ways to become a  
**better listener**

**SAMARITANS**

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# There are few things more powerful than feeling truly listened to.

**Ever since Samaritans was first launched back in 1953, that simple truth has guided everything we do.**

We believe that being listened to can help you cope during the most difficult times. It can change how you see yourself and the world around you. It can help you find hope.

But when was the last time you felt that someone was really listening to you?

And how much do you think about being a good listener yourself?

**This simple guide will introduce you to the kind of training we give to all of our listening volunteers before they answer their first call or email. We hope you'll find it useful in your conversations too.**



# SHUSH – five ways to be an active listener

Have you heard of our SHUSH active listening tips?

Knowing what each letter stands for can really help if a friend or family member starts talking to you about something that's on their mind.

**SAMARITANS**

# SHUSH

listening tips

Top tips for becoming a better listener



Samaritans wants to encourage people to listen to the really important things their friends, family and colleagues need to tell them, and to devote some time and attention to being better listeners.

- S** Show you care  
Focus on the other person, make eye contact, put away your phone.
- H** Have patience  
It may take time and several attempts before a person is ready to open up.
- U** Use open questions  
That need more than a yes/no answer, and follow up eg 'Tell me more'.
- S** Say it back  
To check you've understood, but don't interrupt or offer a solution.
- H** Have courage  
Don't be put off by a negative response and, most importantly, don't feel you have to fill a silence.

[samaritans.org/shush](http://samaritans.org/shush)

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# Here's how our SHUSH approach works



## Show you care

**To really listen to somebody, give them your full attention, with plenty of eye contact and your phone out of reach. Being engaged with what someone is telling you makes such a difference.**

Try not to talk about yourself at all. It can be hard not to try and identify with what people tell us, but everyone's situation is unique. Try to avoid offering solutions and opinions too.



### Top tip

**Keep a listening diary for a week. Every night, write down how many times you feel like you listened well that day, what went well and what you found tricky. It's a handy way to think about your listening skills.**



## Have patience

**It can take time for someone to feel ready to open up – even if they have started the conversation. Being an effective listener is about creating trust.**

The person speaking to you shouldn't feel rushed. If they pause when they're speaking, don't fill the silence straightaway. They might be finding it difficult to put their feelings into words, or they might be trying to articulate what they want to say next.

Try to help the person relax into the conversation, so they feel able to work through difficult emotions.



## Use open questions

**That means questions that need more than a yes or no answer.**

If you ask open questions, it avoids you stating your viewpoint or giving an opinion. It encourages the person you are speaking to to pause, think, reflect and hopefully expand on what they are feeling.

Questions like 'How did that make you feel?' 'What did you mean by...?' and 'Would it help to talk more about...?' can all be helpful. 'How are you feeling today?' can also be a simple but very powerful question.



## Say it back

Repeating something back to somebody can help them feel reassured that they have your undivided attention. It very often prompts someone to say more, too.

It's also a good way to avoid giving your own opinion or solution. And it can help you to check you're hearing what the person you are speaking to is really saying, rather than what you want to hear.



## Have courage

It's not always easy to ask someone how they are feeling. It can feel intrusive. But you'll soon be able to tell if someone is uncomfortable and doesn't want to engage in a conversation.

You might well be surprised at how willing people are to share any issues they are struggling with. When they can see that someone is really willing to listen, it can be all the encouragement they need to open up.



### Quick task

Take two minutes now to try and commit the five SHUSH phrases to memory. Show you care. Have patience. Use open questions. **Say it back. Have courage.** Then when you wake up tomorrow morning, try and go through them in your head again.

## Sympathy vs empathy

**As Samaritans, we listen to all of our callers with empathy. But what does that mean – and how is it different from sympathy?**

To understand the difference between sympathy and empathy, imagine a jogger running along a road.

Someone talking to them with sympathy might say something like: 'Oh, you poor thing! Have you been running long? It must be really hard. You look so tired and thirsty!' When we sympathise with someone, we feel sorry for them. We remain apart from them, never sharing in their experience.

An empathetic conversation would look very different. Imagine someone starting a conversation with the jogger by simply saying: 'Mind if I run with you?' When we listen with empathy, we join someone where they are, so we can better understand what it feels like to be them. We don't judge, give advice or try to make things better. Instead, we create a connection with another person, letting them express themselves on their own terms.

**As you're focusing on becoming a better listener, always try to listen with empathy.**



## Remember the tumble dryer



**It might surprise you to know we always talk to our new listening volunteers about emotions and feelings being like clothes in a tumble dryer, spinning around and around – a confusing mess.**

By listening, we can give people the chance to sort through the items that are spinning around inside them. We can give them the chance to tidy them up, one after another. After a conversation, the same number of thoughts and feelings are still there, but they are more ordered. This can help a situation to feel easier to understand and cope with. That's the power of listening.

## How to talk about getting extra support

**If you speak to someone and feel it might be useful for them to get extra help, it's important to handle the conversation sensitively.**

You could mention services that you think would be useful, and pass on contact information. You could also offer to go with them to appointments, or to get in touch again in the next few days to see how they are getting on.

You can't force someone to seek help – but you can make sure they know that you're there for them, and will support them if they do.

# Don't forget about you

**It's always important to look after yourself, and that includes when you're supporting someone you're worried about.**

If you're feeling low or struggling to cope, remember that you're not alone. Many people struggle to cope at one point or another, and going through a range of emotions at this time is common.

**There are lots of things you can do to help yourself.**

- Make time for yourself, relax and do things you enjoy
- Eat healthily, get plenty of sleep and exercise
- Spend time with people you love
- Talk about your problems with people you trust
- Be proud of what you're good at, as well as aware of what you struggle at
- Pay attention to what you're feeling



## Be kind to yourself every day

Our new free self-help app can help you track your mood and find practical tips and techniques to look after your emotional health. Give it a try at [selfhelp.samaritans.org](http://selfhelp.samaritans.org)



Whatever you're going through, call us free any time, from any phone, on 116 123. Email us at [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Write to us at Chris, Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, STIRLING FK8 2SA

# So now what?

**We hope the tips we've included here are useful.**

They are based on how our listening volunteers speak with Samaritans callers every day.

A lot of this comes down to really engaging in a conversation, making sure a person feels comfortable, being encouraging and trying to avoid offering solutions or advice.

It's important to remember that none of us are brilliant listeners all of the time, so don't be hard on yourself. It's great that you're making an effort to be a better listener.

**We hope that by thinking about the ideas in this guide you'll become a more confident listener too.**



## Ready to listen with Samaritans?

If you've enjoyed learning about listening and would like to know more, we are always looking for new Samaritans volunteers. We would love you to get involved – and you'll be supported at every step by your local Samaritans branch.

To find out more, head to [samaritans.org/volunteer](https://samaritans.org/volunteer)