

## Important Takeaways

### 1. Ground rules

- Don't do a shift by yourself
- Don't offer alcohol
- Try not to offer money whilst on shift (to avoid the expectation that all volunteers will be as generous!)

### 2. Conversation starters

- Try to start off with some more open questions! If they're not very conversational, then maybe they're just not really interested in chatting at that time
- Ask how their day has been, or maybe a bit about them
- If they have a dog then you can definitely chat about them - most people love talking about dogs!!
- Stay away from sensitive topics e.g. drugs/alcohol

### 3. Tips for being a supportive conversation partner

- Be yourself
- Have a nice/friendly tone

### 4. 'What to do in a difficult situation' - include:

- If someone asks you for money/ alcohol/ items you do not have, explain that it's not TSHA policy to donate money or alcohol on shift
- If someone asks you to do something for them this is up to you
  - If you want to try to help, then obviously you're welcome to, but we don't specifically train our volunteers about how to help out with these specific ways.
- If someone asks you for advice
  - There's some brilliant info at <https://www.oxfordshirehomelessmovement.org/i-need-help>
  - Go to that webpage and navigate the specific issue that they need advice with
- If someone is angry
  - If you feel unsafe at any time, you should leave the situation - your safety is the number 1 priority here
  - Try to stay calm if you can. Maybe try to work out what the problem is, and see how you can address it
- If someone is injured
  - If someone needs non-emergency care, they can register with Luther Street Medical Centre
  - In an emergency, where there is imminent threat to life, you should call 999
- If someone won't engage in conversation/ is rude (again stress this is v uncommon!)
  - It's fine if they're not too talkative, people may often be tired or cold, and that's fine
  - If you feel unsafe at any time, you should leave the situation
- If someone asks for where they can get shelter/support, offer them a support card!
  - Support cards have information about nearby shelters and available support. These are in the shift bags

## Ground Rules

On the actual shift, approach homeless people gently and offer them the things you have. Don't worry if right now, you don't feel confident in being able to approach a stranger like that; it's the main reason we require there being at least one experienced volunteer per shift. If you wish, you can stay and chat for as long as you like; it's not officially in our remit to do so with everyone we meet, but most of the people we see appreciate it very much.

There are a few ground rules, beyond the obvious (don't get into fights, etc. etc.):

- Always go out with at least one other person, even if you feel able to do a shift by yourself. It's a health and safety thing. Not that it would be particularly dangerous, but better safe than sorry.
- Do not offer alcohol. We also don't offer cigarettes in our supplies, but you're allowed to offer them if you happen to have some yourself.
- Although TSHA does not have an official stance on whether or not you should give money to the homeless, we ask you not to do so while you are on shift, as this creates an expectation among the homeless population towards TSHA members that can be unfair on fellow volunteers.

## Starting a conversation

It's understandable to worry about how to approach a homeless person; you're often approaching a complete stranger, and everyone's acutely aware that this isn't the same power dynamic as in a conversation between two friends.

- The main advice is as above: have a nice tone! Smile a little, and make it clear exactly what you're there for: say hi, and tell them you've brought hot drinks and sandwiches to offer. The vast majority of people will respond to the offer enthusiastically.
- If they say no after they're aware of everything you have to offer, move on. There's basically no situation in which you can improve things by pestering people.
- There are some alcoves on High Street that go quite far in, and are often hotspots for homeless people. Some people like the comfort and privacy such alcoves afford, so don't march straight up them; stand slightly in, and try to get their attention.

As for starting an actual conversation, most of the time you don't need to do anything, because hot drinks are great ice-breakers. If someone is reticent, however, you can try to start the conversation.

- An obvious, instinctual starter is "How are you?" Nine times out of ten this will be perfectly fine as a conversation starter; however, people can sometimes respond to this with hostility, saying something along the lines of "How do you *think* I'm doing?" Here, then, are some alternatives you could use:
- "It's cold, isn't it?" If it's a cold day out, or the weather's been terrible, this can help start a conversation. You're not presupposing anything about how they're doing, but you are indirectly giving them an opportunity to talk about how the weather's affecting them.
- "That's a cute/lovely dog, what's its name?" No dog owner doesn't want to talk about their dog.
- "Have you been in Oxford long?" Another nice, non-committal question that enables people to talk about their situation without feeling like probing.
- You might like to know the name of the person you're talking to. If they don't give it, it's perfectly fine to ask their name. Consider asking it this way, though: "Do you mind if I ask your name? I'm (name)." It's a little politer to give your own name when you ask, and this question both asks for the person's name while offering them an easy way to refuse should they want to.

- One thing to notice about these suggestions is that they are all “closed questions”; essentially, questions that can be answered with a single word, rather than requiring them to expand a bit more (as “how” or “why” questions would). If you have experience at listening services, you’ll recognise this as the exact opposite of what you’re told to do; listening services will always encourage you to use open questions as a supportive listener. In fact, this discrepancy is intentional -- whereas people call up Nightline or Samaritans of their own accord, you’re the one approaching the person as a TSHA volunteer. This means that, when starting a conversation at least, you absolutely do want to give your conversation partner the opportunity to shut down the conversation with an abrupt answer. Some people don’t want to talk, and that’s perfectly fine. If your opening gambit doesn’t work, nothing’s gone wrong, it’s just a sign that the person would prefer not to talk right now.

### *Continuing the conversation*

This is the “hard part”, for two reasons. Firstly, it can be awkward if your conversation just trails off, but you’re not prepared to leave. Secondly, we’re not always good at talking about other people’s problems. When someone has personal and negative experiences they want to share, a common problem people report is that they “don’t know what to say”.

A helpful starting point is to think of what someone wants from a supportive conversation partner. Here are the four broad characteristics you’d want (maybe try to get volunteers to come up with these themselves!):

- Someone who’s listening
- Someone who’s alongside them
- Someone who’s not judging them
- Someone who wants to talk about what they want to talk about

So long as you keep these desired characteristics in mind, you can’t go wrong.

However, it can be difficult to do this in a truly supportive way; you don’t just want to not judge someone, you want to show you’re not judging them! To that end, here are five broad guidelines as to how you can be a supportive listener, in a supportive manner.

### *Pacing*

- Simply by matching the tempo of your speech with that of your conversation partner, you’re showing that you’re listening and engaging. This doesn’t need to be exact, and obviously shouldn’t be forced.
- This is more important if you like your conversations fast-paced, and your conversation partner is a slow talker. If someone stops talking, pay attention to whether they’ve actually stopped, or if they’re thinking about what they want to say next. If the latter, don’t interrupt them!
- Don’t be afraid of silence! If the conversation has trailed off, it’s a natural instinct for many of us to immediately try to think of something to say. Instead, it’s usually more comfortable for everyone to let the silence sit for a little bit, and afterwards saying something if it pops into your head, or ending the conversation and leaving if not.

### *Body language*

- Smile a little, nod a little, make some eye contact. Not too much and not too little; generally, if it feels comfortable to you, you’re doing it right.
- It’s usually better to sit down beside someone than to talk to them from a standing position. On that note, keep in mind that some streets on Oxford are quite narrow; if you’re sitting down, remember to sit close enough to the wall to not get in the way of pedestrians.

### *Open questions*

- Once a conversation's started, that's when it's useful to ask open questions. Open questions are those that cannot be answered with a simple, one-word answer, but with full explanations:
  - "How come they said that to you?"
  - "What makes you say that?"
- Crucially, open questions are useful because they don't allow you to presume something about your conversational partner. If someone says they were accosted by the police, and you say "is that because you were drunk?", there's a good chance they'd be a bit offended. At the same time, if you say "the police are always harassing people for no reason, aren't they?", that can come across as insincere because you don't actually know what the situation is. It's safer in such cases to ask a non-presuming question like "how come?"

### Exploring feelings

- It can often be incredibly helpful and comforting to talk about your feelings; "letting it out", so to speak. But it's also rare that we ever get an opportunity to talk about how we feel, especially if we're on the street and have reduced contact with other people. Don't be afraid to ask people how they feel about things. If they don't want to answer it, they won't, but if they do, you may be helping them a great deal.
- Easy ways to explore feelings include the following questions:
  - "What was that like?"
  - "How did you feel about that?"
- One thing to be aware of, is not to probe too much. In particular, avoid asking about details of traumatic experiences such as sexual assault. Generally, ask more about the experience (how it made them feel), and less about the details (what happened).

### Empathetic "nothing"s

- Empathetic "nothing"s, despite the superficial and slightly stupid-sounding name, are in fact the most useful tool you can use to be a supportive listener. Basically, they are short phrases that say basically nothing at all, EXCEPT they show your conversation partner that you're listening, that you hear what they're saying, and that you're empathising with them.
- The basic empathetic "nothing" is the "non-verbal" ("Mhm." "Uh-huh."). Sprinkling non-verbals during lulls in someone's speech is a good way to show that you're listening.
- Nice, easy and uncontroversial "nothing"s include:
  - "That sounds awful"

### Tips for being an effective and supportive conversation partner

Two principles underlie everything to do with being a supportive conversation partner:

- **Be yourself.** There's nothing worse you can do than to try to force yourself to do or say something you're not comfortable with. There may be things in the following that feel very unnatural or stilted to you; if that's the case, follow your instinct. It's less important to learn the exact phrases we suggest, and far more important to understand the reasons why those phrases are suggested, so you can think about those reasons and come up with variants that suit your own style of conversation.
- **Have a nice tone.** The above said, the one thing you can never go wrong with is having a nice, warm tone. You don't have to have an amazing voice for this; it has as much to do with how you present yourself as how you speak. A useful mantra is "softer, deeper, slower, lower", which adequately describes what a good, warm tone sounds like. If it helps, think of a pastoral, supportive figure you know and respect, and think about how they speak to you, and especially what it is about their tone that makes it seem warm.

The essential thing is that being supportive isn't an exact science; it's something you get a feel for through experience. This means that nothing here deals in extremes. We may suggest phrases to use, but that doesn't

mean you have to use them, nor does it mean they'll work all the time. They are merely suggestions to add to your own conversational repertoire. Similarly, we may say that certain phrases could be avoided for certain reasons, but it's not the end of the world if you say them, and if they come naturally to you, that's as good a reason as any to use them. Crucially, you'll want to pay attention to the *reasoning* behind our suggestions. Think about what factors underlie the suggestions we make, and use them to inform your own conversational style.