Unhelpful responses to people in distress

When someone shares something personal with someone else, the most important thing for them is to feel heard and understood. All of us know how hard it can be to open ourselves to another and to share our vulnerabilities or fears. Young people can find this particularly hard. Research suggests that many young people don't reach out for support when they need it. It's always a privilege to have someone trust you enough to share their personal experiences with you. Your capacity to listen and empathise can make a huge difference.

Sometimes, without meaning to, we can all say things that don't demonstrate empathy when someone shares something with us. We can unintentionally make someone feel that they haven't been heard. Or, we say things that make it seem like we're minimising or dismissing their experiences or feelings. Our 'Tips on Listening to People in Distress' handout gives some general guidance on what *to do* to demonstrate empathy. Here we outline some of the kinds of phrases *to avoid saying* to anyone who shares something personal or distressing with you.

Phrases to avoid

"Don't worry about it"

"You're making a big deal out of nothing"

"It's all in your head"

"You're overreacting, it'll be fine"

"I never thought someone like you would feel/think like that"

"I've had anxiety/depression/etc. too. Let me tell you about how it was for me...."

"What have you got to be depressed about? You've so many good things in your life"

"You just need to get up and get out and you'll feel better"

"Why don't you just get out of the house more or start running or going to the gym?"

It's important to start by listening; reflecting; asking and empathising. Once you've done that, you can then offer reassurance and/or signpost someone to information or support.

Finally, we're all human and don't get it right all of the time. So, don't be hard on yourself if you struggle to find the right words. Remember, young people can pick up on your intention and they usually know when someone is trying to be there for them.