



Guernsey Mind's Community of Practice for Bailiwick MHFAiders®

Handling Difficult Conversations

Wednesday 12th November 2025

Facilitator: Louisa Mace

Additional Contributor: Alison Rimmington

Session Type: Interactive training, breakout discussions, and reflective exercises

Session Introduction

Louisa Mace opened the session, introducing facilitators and outlining objectives. Alison Rimmington was introduced as a trainee counsellor, currently completing the fourth year and starting placements, and experienced Mental Health First Aider (MHFAider®).

The session focused on handling difficult conversations within the MHFA role, understanding empathy vs. sympathy, reflecting on personal boundaries and wellbeing, and practicing supportive workplace conversations. Interactive methods included breakout rooms, case studies, and reflective exercises.

Breakout Room Activity

Participants explored what makes difficult conversations challenging:

- Fear of unknown responses – uncertainty about how someone might react.
- Responsibility without shared support – managing situations when individuals don't seek external help, leading to feelings of helplessness.
- Balancing duty of care with personal boundaries – understanding where MHFA responsibility ends and individual autonomy begins.

Trainer Reflections:

- Early empathic conversations can make a real difference and help individuals engage with professional support.
- Difficult conversations build trust and belonging by making people feel heard and validated.
- Active listening and empathy were highlighted as central to effective MHFA communication.

Active Listening**Active Listening Techniques:**

- Maintain eye contact, nod, and avoid distractions.
- Listen attentively without interrupting.
- Reflect understanding and stay engaged.

Trainer Discussion:

- Participants shared experiences of challenging conversations.
- Emphasised non-judgment, calmness, and maintaining the other person's autonomy.
- MHFA conversations do not require problem-solving – the focus is on listening and creating a safe space.

Boundaries Discussion:

- Maintain healthy limits around time, place, and method of contact.
- Avoid offering personal contact details for out-of-hours support.
- Reflect on personal emotional capacity—know when to pause, refer, or seek help.

Case Example: A scenario involving suicidal intent highlighted the importance of swift referral, follow-up, and not overstepping boundaries (e.g., continued late-night messaging).

Understanding Empathy – Video & Reflection

- Brené Brown's empathy video illustrated that empathy involves perspective-taking, staying out of judgment, recognising emotion in others, and communicating understanding.
- Empathy: Connecting with another's emotions and validating their experience.
- Sympathy: Often distances or minimises the person's feelings ("silver-lining" responses).
- Trainers encouraged using a calm tone, neutral body language, and awareness of one's emotional reactions.

Boundaries & Self-Care

- Boundaries protect both the MHFAider® and the person seeking help.
- MHFAiders are the first point of support, not ongoing caregivers.

- Flexibility may be needed in urgent cases but should remain intentional.

Conversation Guidance:

- Choose a private, quiet space and an appropriate time.
- Check your own readiness—if not in the right mindset, pause or refer.
- Clarify your role and limitations early in the conversation.
- Know available support pathways (GP, Mind, Samaritans, HR).
- During the conversation: stay calm, monitor escalation, listen actively, avoid problem-solving.
- Afterward: debrief, reflect, and practice self-care.

Self-Care Practices:

Walking, yoga, quiet reflection, and other personal wellbeing strategies were encouraged for sustainability.

Case Study

- Jordan (38), project coordinator, experiencing divorce, custody issues, and workplace stress.
- Feels overwhelmed and unsure of available support.

Breakout Group Tasks:

- Identify signs of poor mental health and workplace impact.
- Plan how to initiate and structure a supportive conversation.
- Explore listening and reassurance strategies.
- Discuss next steps, signposting, and follow-up.
- Reflect on how workplace culture affects openness about mental health.

Reflections on the Case Study

Signs of Strain:

- Frequent lateness or early departures without explanation.
- Declining work quality, missed deadlines, and more frequent errors.
- Withdrawal or irritability in meetings.
- Increased absences, citing feeling unwell.
- Tearfulness, poor concentration, and emotional exhaustion.

Potential Risks:

- Burnout or emotional exhaustion due to ongoing stressors.
- Worsening anxiety or depression if support is not accessed.
- Reduced performance and self-confidence.

- Withdrawal from colleagues or workplace conflict if frustrations grow.

Key Learning Points:

- Early intervention and empathy are vital when someone reaches out for help.
- MHFAiders are not counsellors but play a crucial role in listening non-judgmentally, providing reassurance, and signposting to professional help.
- Feeling “alone” or “unsure where to turn” is a common barrier to seeking help—your response can make a real difference.
- A supportive workplace culture reduces stigma and encourages people to speak up early.

Key Takeaways

Participant Reflection Prompts:

- What resonated most from the session?
- How can these insights support your MHFA practice?
- What additional support do you need?
- How will you apply these skills in real conversations?

Key Principles & Next Steps

Core Principles of Effective MHFA Practice

- **Empathy over Sympathy:**
Connect through shared emotion; listen without minimising or “silver-lining.”
- **Boundaries:**
Protect both yourself and the individual. Define clear limits around time, space, and contact.
- **Active Listening:**
Maintain focus, eye contact, and patience. Reflect understanding rather than offering solutions.
- **Preparation:**
Choose the right time and setting; check your emotional readiness; clarify your role; know available referral pathways.
- **During Conversations:**
Stay calm, non-judgmental, and focused on listening. Avoid problem-solving and monitor for signs of escalation.
- **After Conversations:**
Debrief with peers or MHFA leads, follow up appropriately, maintain confidentiality, and prioritise self-care.
- **Support Pathways:**

Be aware of available resources such as GP, Mind, Samaritans, HR, and professional counselling.

- **MHFAider® Role:**

Remember — you are a first point of contact and source of reassurance, not an ongoing therapist.

Next Steps

- Reflect on your own boundaries, empathy, and self-care following the session.
- Identify any additional training or support needed to strengthen your MHFA practice.
- Apply learnings in workplace conversations while maintaining clear, healthy limits.
- Attend the follow-up session on 12th January, focusing on managing recurring conversations and advanced signposting strategies.

Closing Reflections

- Empathy, active listening, and boundaries are the foundation of effective MHFA practice.
- Self-care is essential for sustainability and personal wellbeing.
- MHFAiders are first responders, not therapists — focus on connecting, listening, and guiding toward support.
- Reach out to Louisa or fellow MHFAiders for peer discussion, advice, or signposting support.