



Guernsey Mind's Community of Practice for Bailiwick MHFAiders®

Conversations, Boundaries, Confidentiality & Escalation

Wednesday 4th January 2026

Facilitator: Louisa Mace

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

Session Introduction

This fourth Community of Practice session—and the first of 2026—focused on building confidence in handling difficult conversations, including how to set and maintain boundaries, uphold confidentiality, and recognise when and how to escalate concerns. It followed on from Ali Remington's November session, continuing the emphasis on developing these core MHFAider skills. The purpose of the session was to reinforce the importance of early, supportive conversations, highlighting that careful listening helps reduce distress and can prevent situations from escalating into crisis.

Why Even MHFAiders Avoid Tough Conversations

Even trained MHFAiders can find difficult conversations challenging, and the group explored several common reasons these moments can feel uncomfortable or overwhelming.

- **Fear of “saying the wrong thing”** – Many MHFAiders worry that a poorly phrased question or comment might unintentionally make the situation worse, which can create hesitation or avoidance.
- **Uncertainty about how to start or guide the conversation** – Beginning a sensitive discussion can feel daunting, especially when the person is distressed or the topic is unexpected. MHFAiders may feel unsure about what direction to take or how to pace the conversation safely.
- **Balancing personal boundaries with support for others** – It can be difficult to maintain the right level of emotional distance while still being compassionate and present. MHFAiders often juggle their desire to help with the need to protect their own wellbeing.
- **Worrying about confidentiality** – Concerns about what can or cannot be shared, and when confidentiality might need to be broken, can add pressure and uncertainty to the interaction.
- **Not knowing when escalation is necessary** – Recognising the difference between normal distress and signs that someone needs more urgent or professional support is not always straightforward, which can lead to hesitation or self-doubt.

Key reminder: You don't need to be an expert – simply listening with empathy can significantly reduce distress early on and help prevent a situation from developing into a crisis.

Adar Cohen's Approach to Difficult Conversations

To deepen the discussion, the group watched a clip from a TED Talk by Adar Cohen, a conflict-resolution expert whose work spans some of the most challenging environments for dialogue. He has facilitated conversations in Middle East conflict zones, in Northern Ireland, and within family and community settings, as well as in large institutional systems such as Cook County Jail in Chicago, where he worked with prison staff, clergy, community groups, and previously incarcerated individuals. His TED Talk, “**3 Steps to Leading Difficult Conversations,**” offers practical, human-centred guidance for approaching the conversations people often fear most.

► Watch the talk here: [Adar Cohen Three Steps to leading difficult conversations](#)

Adar Cohen's Three Rules for Leading Difficult Conversations

- **Move Toward the Conflict**

Cohen emphasises that progress only happens when we take a step toward what feels uncomfortable or sensitive. This means addressing what is obvious, naming the tension, and approaching the conversation with curiosity instead of avoidance. Doing so often requires preparation and courage, but it lays the groundwork for meaningful dialogue.

- **You Don't Know Anything (Even If You Do)**

Even when you believe you understand the issue, approaching the conversation as if you're a blank page encourages openness. Cohen recommends using genuinely curious, open questions such as “What do people misunderstand about this?” or “What is this like for you?” This helps people share their experiences without defensiveness and allows space for new insight to emerge.

- **Keep Quiet**

Silence can be one of the most powerful tools in a difficult conversation. By resisting the urge to fill every pause or guide the conversation too quickly, you create space for deeper reflection. Staying quiet allows people to gather their thoughts, express more honestly, and sometimes even listen to themselves in a way that moves the conversation forward.

Outcome from Cohen's story

In the example Cohen shared, a group that began in conflict and hostility gradually shifted into collaboration. Through the application of these principles, they eventually created a programme that provided mentoring and job opportunities for inmates prior to release—demonstrating the transformational potential of well-held conversations.

Keeping Conversations Going: Skills & Techniques

This section explored the practical skills MHFAiders can use to help a conversation flow gently and supportively, ensuring the other person feels heard, understood, and safe to continue sharing.

Avoid

- **Jumping to solutions** – Offering fixes too early can shut down the conversation and may make the person feel rushed or misunderstood. People often need space to express their feelings before they can think about next steps.
- **Rushing to close the conversation** – Ending too quickly can signal discomfort or impatience. Allowing the conversation to unfold at the person's pace helps build trust and ensures nothing important is missed.
- **Making assumptions** – Filling in the gaps or interpreting their situation for them can lead to misunderstandings. Let the person explain their experience in their own words, even if you think you know what's going on.

Instead

- **Listen more than you speak** – Giving the person much of the space encourages openness and shows that your priority is understanding, not responding.

- **Validate feelings** – Acknowledging emotions helps the person feel seen and supported, reducing shame and defensiveness.
- **Reflect back what you've heard** – Summarising their words gently ensures accuracy and shows that you're genuinely engaged in their experience.
- **Check your understanding** – Simple clarifying questions such as “*Do I have that right?*” can deepen trust and ensure you're both on the same page.

Useful Open Questions

- **Tell me a bit more about what's going on** – This invites the person to expand at their own pace, allowing them to decide where the conversation should begin and what feels most important to share.
- **What feels hardest right now?** – A focused question that helps identify the most pressing source of stress or distress, giving clarity about what support might be needed first.
- **What have you tried so far, and has anything helped?** – Encourages reflection on coping strategies already in place and acknowledges their efforts, while also helping you understand what has or hasn't been effective.
- **Are there moments when things feel slightly easier or lighter?** – Helps the person recognise small pockets of relief or stability, which can be grounding and may reveal protective factors or strengths.
- **What do you wish others understood?** – Provides space for the person to express frustrations, misconceptions, or needs that may not be obvious to others, helping you better appreciate their experience.
- **What support or next step would feel right today?** – A gentle way to explore options without imposing solutions, encouraging the person to stay in control of their choices and identify what they feel ready for.

Encouraging Statements

- **That sounds incredibly tough** – Acknowledges the difficulty of the situation and signals that their feelings are legitimate.
- **I'm sorry you're dealing with that** – Shows compassion and recognition of the emotional load the person is carrying.
- **It makes sense you feel this way** – Helps reduce shame or self-criticism by reassuring them that their reaction is reasonable and understandable.
- **I can hear how exhausting this has been** – Validates the emotional and physical strain they may be experiencing and shows that you are truly listening.
- **You've been doing your best** – Reinforces their efforts and can help counter feelings of inadequacy or guilt.
- **Thank you for sharing – I'm glad you told me** – This was highlighted as particularly important. Sharing difficult information is an act of trust and acknowledging that trust actively strengthens psychological safety and rapport.

Boundaries Matter

This section explored why healthy boundaries are essential for MHFAiders, helping to ensure that support is offered safely, sustainably, and without compromising personal wellbeing.

- **Differences in boundaries with friends, colleagues, and strangers**
The level of closeness you have with someone naturally shapes how you communicate and what you feel comfortable sharing. MHFAiders discussed how boundaries may feel more flexible with friends, while

professional or unfamiliar relationships require clearer limits and a greater emphasis on maintaining appropriate distance.

- **The example of Nadia and Liam from the MHFA course**

This scenario was used to illustrate how blurred boundaries can create confusion or emotional strain. It emphasised the importance of recognising when a relationship is shifting into territory that may not be appropriate for a support role, and how to navigate those situations with care.

- **Maintaining boundaries even while helping**

- **Not sharing personal details** – It is important to keep the focus on the person seeking support; sharing too much of your own experience can unintentionally shift the conversation or create expectations you cannot meet.
- **Ensuring your own safety** – MHFAiders must be aware of physical, emotional, and situational safety. Supporting someone should never come at the cost of personal risk or wellbeing.
- **Ensuring the other person has follow-up support** – MHFAiders are not responsible for ongoing care; part of maintaining boundaries is making sure the individual has appropriate continuing support from trusted contacts such as family, friends, or professionals.

- **Self-reflection is essential** – Your emotional capacity fluctuates, and factors such as stress, personal circumstances, tiredness, or workload directly affect how effectively you can support someone. Recognising your limits and stepping back when necessary is not a failure – it's part of responsible MHFA practice.

Confidentiality: Scenario Discussions

This section explored a series of realistic scenarios to help MHFAiders understand when information can remain confidential and when concerns must be escalated for safety, wellbeing, or safeguarding reasons.

- **Scenario 1 — Overwhelmed but coping**

When someone is experiencing stress or emotional strain but remains stable and safe, the conversation can usually stay confidential. However, MHFAiders should continue to check in and remain alert to any changes that might signal emerging risk.

- **Scenario 2 — Past depression with prior support**

A person reflecting on previous experiences of depression can be supported confidentially, as long as they are currently safe. This type of disclosure may open the door for future conversations, offering an opportunity to check how they're coping and whether additional support may help.

- **Scenario 3 — “Please don't tell anyone”**

Requests for secrecy can generally be respected unless warning signs of crisis or deterioration appear. MHFAiders should explain confidentiality boundaries early on—for example, “If I become concerned for your safety, I may need to involve others who can help”—so the individual understands when confidentiality must be broken.

- **Scenario 4 — Feeling unsafe or experiencing intrusive thoughts**

Any indication that someone feels unsafe, is considering self-harm, or is experiencing intrusive thoughts that affect their ability to stay safe requires escalation. This may involve workplace support (such as a line manager or HR), trusted friends or family, or professional services like a GP or mental health team. Introducing a WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) may also be appropriate to help them identify triggers, support networks, and early-warning signs.

- **Scenario 5 — Possible abuse or neglect**

Situations involving suspected abuse or neglect are safeguarding issues. These must be escalated immediately, regardless of whether the individual wants the information shared, as MHFAiders have a duty to protect vulnerable people from harm.

- **Scenario 6 — Locked in bathroom, discussing self-harm**

This is an example of immediate, high-risk crisis. MHFAiders must escalate urgently—calling an ambulance or paramedics if injury is possible and notifying a physical first aider where relevant.

Throughout the escalation, it is important to stay calm, keep talking to the person, and help them feel as safe as possible until help arrives.

Escalation: The Traffic Light Model

This section outlined a simple but effective framework to help MHFAiders judge when to keep a conversation at a supportive level and when escalating concerns becomes necessary for the individual's safety and wellbeing.

Green – Mild Concern

At this stage, the person appears to be coping, even if they are experiencing some stress or difficulty. They are open to support, receptive to talking, and able to manage their situation with existing strategies. Conversations at this level can usually remain confidential between the MHFAider and the individual. Support may involve gentle listening, normalising their feelings, and offering light signposting to helpful resources if appropriate.

Amber – Ongoing Issues / Struggling to Cope

Amber signals that the person's challenges are beginning to exceed their current coping capacity. They may have already tried various support strategies that are no longer effective, or their situation is starting to impact daily functioning. At this point, the MHFAider should consider involving additional support such as a line manager, HR, or trusted external networks to ensure the person is not coping alone. This stage is also where introducing a WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) may be beneficial to help clarify triggers, supports, and personalised strategies to manage their wellbeing.

Red – Struggling Significantly / Possible Risk

Red represents high concern, where the individual may be at risk even if they are not actively in crisis. Their safety or wellbeing may be compromised, and more urgent intervention may be required. Appropriate escalation could involve reaching out to family or close friends, contacting the Samaritans, supporting the person to access their GP or emergency services, or calling A&E if the risk is imminent. If physical harm has occurred or is likely, involving a physical first aider is essential. In all cases, the MHFAider's priority is to stay calm, ensure safety, and involve the right level of professional help.

Group Breakouts

This section summarised the reflections from the breakout groups, who discussed current practices, gaps, and opportunities for strengthening MHFAider support across different workplaces.

- **Existing escalation processes**

Groups compared how escalation is currently handled in their organisations, noting wide variation in clarity and structure. Some workplaces have informal or partially developed processes, while others lack defined guidance altogether, making decisions more challenging for MHFAiders.

- **Accessibility of supports for MHFAiders**

Participants reflected on how easy—or difficult—it is to access support when acting in the MHFA role. This included questions about who they can turn to for advice, whether peer networks exist, and how consistently managers or HR teams understand and endorse the MHFA function.

- **Availability of WRAP templates**

The discussion highlighted the usefulness of the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) as a wellbeing tool. Several participants were unsure if a template was available within their organisation, and there was collective interest in having a shared version that MHFAiders could offer where appropriate.

Key findings:

- **Lack of clear escalation guidance:** Many workplaces do not yet have a formal escalation framework that MHFAiders can rely on, leading to uncertainty when navigating risk or boundary decisions.
- **Interest in shared resources:** Participants expressed enthusiasm for developing and sharing tools—such as WRAP templates, escalation guides, or quick-reference documents—to improve consistency and confidence across the MHFAider community.

Resources Available

This section reviewed the range of tools, information, and ongoing supports available to MHFAiders to help them feel confident, informed, and connected in their role.

- **MHFA England app & resources**

These official tools provide guidance, reassurance, and easy access to core MHFA principles. The app includes quick-reference information, conversation tips, and updates from MHFA England to support practice on the go.

- **Guernsey Mind signposting and information**

Local guidance helps MHFAiders direct individuals to the right services within the Bailiwick, including mental health charities, crisis contacts, GP support, and community wellbeing options.

- **Conversation prompts & pocket guides**

These are designed to support real-time conversations, offering simple reminders of effective questioning, validation techniques, and safe responses when someone is distressed.

- **Pathway guides for workplace policies**

Workplace-specific guidance helps MHFAiders align their actions with organisational procedures, particularly around escalation, confidentiality, and employee wellbeing processes.

- **Community of Practice notes & sessions**

Regular sessions and archived notes provide ongoing learning, reflection, and peer support, helping MHFAiders build confidence through shared experience.

- **New MHFA Members Area on the Guernsey Mind Website**

A new online space has been created to centralise resources, improve accessibility, and provide continuous support for MHFAiders. Accessible under:

- Training & Development → MHFA Members Area
- Password: Community

The Members Area includes:

- **MHFA England support links** – Direct access to official materials, guidance updates, and refresher content.
- **Local signposting information** – A curated list of Bailiwick-specific services and support networks.
- **Refresher course information** – Details on upcoming sessions to help MHFAiders maintain their accreditation and confidence.
- **RSPH Level 3 Mental Health qualification link** – Information for those wishing to continue their professional development.
- **Further reading** – Replaces the former post-course email with an easily accessible resource hub.
- **Community of Practice pages** – Includes upcoming dates, previous session summaries, and downloadable notes.

Closing & Next Meeting

To wrap up the session, the facilitator shared a few final reflections and outlined what MHFAiders can expect moving forward, expressing appreciation to all attendees for taking the time to participate and recognising the value of shared learning, discussion, and continued commitment to supporting others safely and effectively. Attendees were also invited to share real-world experiences, challenges, and insights at future Community of Practice sessions, as these lived examples help strengthen collective confidence and support the development of practical, grounded approaches across the MHFAider network. The next meeting will take place on Wednesday 18 March at 12:30 (topic TBA), with MHFAiders encouraged to attend to continue building skills, confidence, and a sense of community in the role.