

A Guide to Providing Emotional Support Online to Refugee Youth

Roxanne Nanton, Giorgia Doná & Tiago Brandão

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Context

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many charities became eager to digitise their services and help beneficiaries access support onlineⁱ. As face-to-face services rapidly transitioned to digital platforms, obstacles began to arise. A recent study highlighted the challenges that charity practitioners face when offering advice and support to refugee youth onlineⁱⁱ. These included building trust, providing emotional support and setting boundaries. It became evident that a training was essential for practitioners to improve their skills in this field if they were to continue working remotely.

The Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging at the University of East London (UEL), in partnership with the Refugee Council (RC) and psychotherapist Tiago Brandão, designed and implemented a training programme on how to provide emotional support online to staff working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children.

An initial needs assessment was conducted with staff and its findings were used to develop the content of the training sessions. The training was provided by Tiago Brandão who has worked closely with RC practitioners

over the last few years. A post-training feedback survey was also completed.

Based on the findings of the training-research project, the purpose of this booklet is to offer the RC staff and volunteers, as well as practitioners in the charity sector, examples of good practice on providing emotional support while working remotely.

The guidelines presented are general and should be adapted and considered in the context of different roles. The phrases ‘working online’ and ‘working remotely’ are used interchangeably merely to distinguish from working in the physical presence of another person.



Section 1: Understanding & Addressing Emotions

This section provides key definitions on techniques that can be used when working with young people online. It also defines emotional states or experiences relating to refugee youth that should be considered when providing support.

Boundaries

Definition:

Boundaries are limits people set in order to create a healthy sense of personal space. Boundaries can be physical or emotional in nature, and they help distinguish the desires, needs, and preferences of one person from anotherⁱⁱⁱ.

Why it matters:

Working remotely has led to practitioners feeling that they have fewer boundaries. Work life and personal life can become blurred when working from home and only being contactable by phone or email means that some

feel that they must be available at all times, even outside of working hours. If young people know this is the only means to get advice or support, they expect the practitioner to be available to answer their message or speak to them whenever they contact them.

Tips:

- Arrange telephone appointments with clients in the same way you would ask them to come to the office at a set time.
- Try to implement your daily routine as you would when going to the office, e.g., go for short walks, take a lunch break, start and finish work 'on time', switch off your phone and laptop when you have finished working.
- It is important to have a good working-from-home set up e.g., a clear desk, comfortable chair, good lighting.



Grounding

Definition:

Grounding is a strategy that is designed to connect you to the present moment to help decrease the intensity of emotions or trauma. It can help break negative thought processes and calm anxiety^{iv}.

Why it matters:

Young people who have experienced trauma and/ or experience intense emotions can benefit from grounding techniques. Practitioners working with young people can also practice grounding before speaking to young people to help focus before a session to ensure the client has their full attention.

Tips:

- Focus on the five senses: sight, touch, hearing, taste, and smell.
- Look at five things, touch four things, listen for three things, try and smell two things, see if you can taste one thing.

- Breathing: place both feet firmly on the ground. Breathe in for five and out for seven. Repeat five times.



Mirroring

Definition:

Reflecting or emulating speech, affect, behaviour, or other qualities in psychotherapeutic contexts. A therapist [or professional] may adopt the movements, speech style, or locutions of a client, and vice versa, to indicate comprehension of what is being said or to reflect bonding, either non-consciously or with the intent of empathizing^v.

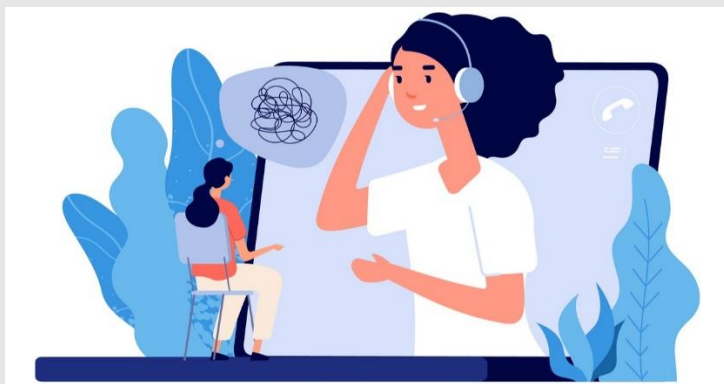
Why it matters:

We are hardwired to mirror in a nonverbal way e.g., through body language. However, when working remotely one's voice, tone and breathing can impact another person. A young person might raise their voice on the phone, speak very fast and in an aggressive way which can make the practitioner feel tense and want to react in a similar way in order to be heard.

Tips:

- Try using a calm and controlled voice in a soft/deep tone to help relax a client.

- If using an interpreter, ask them to try and use the same voice/tone as you.



Non-verbal communication

Definition:

Nonverbal communication is defined as all wordless interactions, including hand gestures, posture, facial expressions and eye contact. In addition to this, vocal intonation, speaking style, speed and tone all affect how you converse with others^{vi}.

Why it matters:

As humans, we are very sight focused and we naturally mirror one another to create a connection. If we are working remotely without being able to see the other person, we need to be more conscious of our tone of voice, intonation and the speed in which we speak as this will impact the person on the other end of the phone/communication platform.

Tips:

- Use a deeper tone when trying to soothe a young person who is upset.
- Ask the interpreter to try and use the same tone.

- If a young person is distressed and angry, try to continue to use a calm tone.
- Vary your intonation to give energy or to motivate the person you are speaking to.



Online Disinhibition Effect

Definition:

A lack of restraint when interacting online in comparison to in-person resulting in poorly controlled or poorly restrained emotions or actions^{vii}.

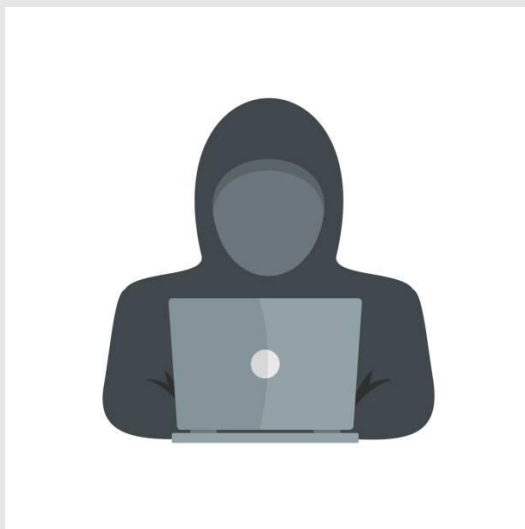
Why it matters:

Young people can experience the disinhibition effect when communicating with practitioners online for example: they may overshare information (verbally or by text) in an uncontrolled way, due to being 'invisible' or behind a screen. They may feel they are anonymous and therefore talk more openly and disclose things quicker than normal or be more aggressive than normal. They may feel overwhelmed or a sense of regret as a consequence.

Tips:

- Be aware of this behaviour. Set boundaries with young people.
- Explain to them if their behaviour is inappropriate.

- Arrange a follow up call or meeting face-to-face to discuss anything that was concerning.



Self-care

Definition:

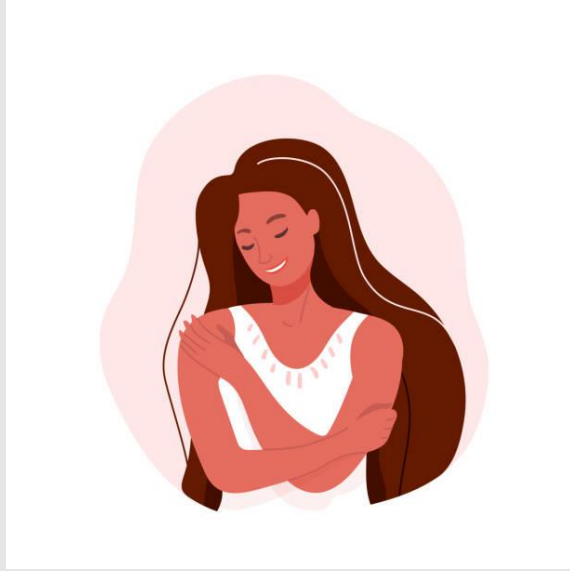
Providing adequate attention to one's own physical and psychological wellness^{viii}.

Why it matters:

Self-care is an ethical responsibility. You need to look after yourself before you can begin to look after others. Working with young people who have experienced trauma can take its toll and it is important to be aware of the impact it is having on your mental health.

Tips:

- If you have had a difficult session with a client, speak to your manager or a colleague about it. This will help you reflect and learn from the experience.
- If you are attending reflective practice/clinical supervision, make a note to bring the experience to your supervision. Supervision supports participants to process their experiences in a more grounded and balanced way.



Trauma

Definition:

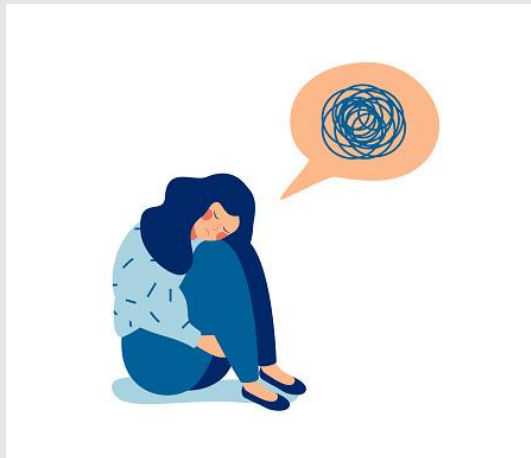
Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behaviour, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behaviour (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place^{ix}.

Why it matters:

Working with young people online who have experienced trauma is challenging. As their threat perception system has become enhanced, they may see danger when others see situations as normal causing them to overreact about small issues. Their ability to focus is also limited (this may further increase if not face-to-face) and they struggle to differentiate between issues that are relevant and irrelevant. Trauma can also lead young people to suppress their emotions; in a situation where one might expect someone to react, they do not respond with much expression at all.

Tips:

- Read about trauma and how it affects the child's brain.
- Young people may not react to information you share with them in a way that you expect, be mindful of why this is.
- If a young person overreacts, try and calm them down by using grounding techniques (mentioned above).



Trust

Definition:

Reliance on or confidence in the dependability of someone or something. In interpersonal relationships, trust refers to the confidence that a person or group of people has in the reliability of another person or group; specifically, it is the degree to which each party feels that they can depend on the other party to do what they say they will do^x.

Why it matters:

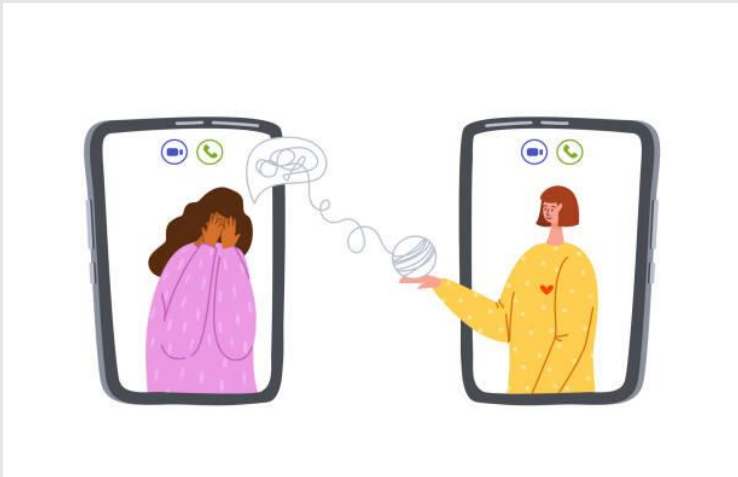
For young people new to a service, speaking to someone for the first time over the phone can be confusing as they have nothing to associate your voice with. They may also receive several phone calls a week from different professionals and become unsure of who to share information with.

Tips:

- State your name clearly and your organisation on every call, even when you already know a client well. They might find it hard to differentiate the

voices of different professionals, especially when they don't speak English.

- If the client has WhatsApp, send a photo of your ID card so they know who you are and which organisation you belong to.
- Try to use the same interpreter when you speak to a client as this helps build trust and helps them to remember who you are if they hear the same voices.



Section 2: Good Practice for Working Online

Before the session

- Young person's resources
 - Check that the young person has access to a mobile phone, smart phone or laptop for your session.
 - If carrying out the session on a laptop it is useful to have the young person's mobile number to hand in case of a technological failure.
 - Send the young person a text message, voice note or WhatsApp message before the session to remind them of the meeting.
- Professional space and online presentation
 - Ensure that you are appropriately dressed to go on camera and that you have a suitable background.
 - Check that your name is updated on your profile and that you are in a quiet, private space or room.
 - Check your signal and internet connection.
 - If it is the first session, send the young person a photo of your ID card so they

know who you are, which organisation you belong to, this helps build trust.

- Cross-cultural communication
 - Find out which country the young person is from and think about whether there are any cultural differences that you need to be aware of when communicating with them.
- Working with interpreters
 - Do you need an interpreter to join your session?
 - Brief the interpreter before speaking to the young person: is there anything they need to be aware of that might impact the session? Ensure you have the correct language and correct dialect.
 - Remind the interpreter of the importance of using a similar tone of voice when working on the phone.
 - Remind the interpreter of the confidentiality agreement if you have not worked with them before.
- Grounding
 - How are you feeling?

- Are you feeling present? Do you need to bracket any concerns/ distractions/ personal issues before you start?



During the session

- Opening
 - Open session with a warm and welcoming tone.
 - Verify you are speaking to the correct young person and find out their location.
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality
 - Are they in a quiet room? Is there good signal/ connection?
- Acknowledge communication language differences
 - If there are any issues with interpreter, it is important that they inform you.
- Safeguarding
 - Gather information in case of risk (be able to contact client or inform others of the young person's location).
 - Be aware of whether there is any risk to self or others (notice what is said and not said).
 - Ask direct questions as appropriate.
- Discussing sensitive topics
 - Ask permission if discussing a sensitive topic – can I ask you...?

- Infer the young person's emotional state from their tone of voice, pace, inflection and use of silence, and check the accuracy of these inferences through reflective comments.
 - Ensure that the young person knows they are being listened to and that you are attentive (e.g., by frequent use of affirmative comments).
 - If you believe the young person needs mental health support, explain what therapy is and ask for their consent to make a referral to a therapist/ therapeutic service.
- Hybrid working
 - If you are working in the office on certain days, let the young person know when they can see you face-to-face and arrange an appointment.
- Closing a session
 - Conclude sessions clearly and calmly, especially when a young person wishes to continue to talk and finds it difficult to disengage.
 - Remind the client of the amount of time you have before needing to end the session (e.g., we have 10 minutes left, is it

okay if we try to focus on these issues before we finish for today?).

- Have the client's expectations been met? Is there anything further they wanted to gain from the session?



After the session

- Referral
 - Do you need to refer to other services? Perhaps services that offer in person support?
- Debrief
 - If you have experienced a difficult conversation with your client, talk to colleagues.
 - Raise any issues with your Line Manager or in a team meeting.
- Training
 - Do you need training on any topic or area that arose?



Section 3: Ethics and Professional Vigilance

- Delivering work online or in a hybrid setting is about transferring offline safeguarding knowledge and practices online.
- Practitioners should stay up to date on the technology that they are using when delivering services online. Speak to your line manager if you think you lack a certain skill and need further training.
- Maintain vigilance around security and privacy online, both for yourself and for your clients. Ensure passwords are regularly updated, use secure WIFI, encrypt emails and inform clients about how they can stay safe online.
- Take immediate action if you believe privacy or security has been breached.
- Use providers and communication platforms that meet the privacy and quality standards needed to deliver your service. If in doubt, conduct searches

online to check if there have been any reported breaches of security.

- Regularly review whether working online with your client is the most suitable method of service delivery.



Appendix

Compassion Fatigue Prevention Worksheet

Compassion Fatigue prevention worksheet

From 1-10 - How full is my care tank?

Warning Signs

- Signs that I'm running low

What would others notice when I'm running low?

What fills me up?

What brings me joy?

Short term

What do I need from myself?
What do I need from others?

How do I protect myself?
Boundaries

Long term

What do I need from myself?
What do I need from others?

Obstacles – What gets in the way of me looking after myself?

Further Reading

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^x American Psychological Association (2020) *APA Dictionary of Psychology, Trust*. Available at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/trust> (Accessed 17/12/21).