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# The Phone Call

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Suffolk Provincial Almoner Service  
January 2021



We cannot visit our Lodges in person at the moment, and may therefore be keeping in touch with our Masonic Brethren by telephone. The skills we need to do this start with being a good listener. Listening is always a priority skill for all Almoners. We assume we can listen, but active listening takes practice and needs attention.

You may have had an opportunity to think about these skills in training sessions and these briefing notes come from Group discussions.

This is intended to be a brief resume of those skills and a refresher.

It is worth practising and honing the skills needed to maximise the amount of support we can offer. Try arranging with a fellow Almoner to practice a supporting phone call.

This briefing is not exhaustive and if you would like a further discussion about these skills or indeed share other tips about phone conversations please contact your Group Almoner.



**Preparation** is important. When you know you are going to be phoning someone it is worth reflecting on the listening skills you will need for a phone conversation.

Get yourself in the right frame of mind. You might like to say to yourself *I am about to make a phone call. I need to go into listening mode!* This helps you prepare to be an active listener.

By putting yourself mentally into a listening mode you will appear approachable, open and receptive to the conversation from the beginning. That first moment in making the phone call can make all the difference



Try to **avoid distractions.** ensuring that there are no distractions around you before you start the call. Remember to be careful about how and where you are sitting. Body language can be picked up in your voice.

Background noises can be off putting (as can constantly apologising for the noises) and can distract you so your attention is not on the person you are calling. Other people close by threatens our policy of confidentiality and undermines the confidence of the person you are calling in that confidentiality



**Give the person you are calling time to adjust to you and the fact that you are calling from the Lodge.** Don't rush into the conversation if the person you call pauses to adjust to the situation. People can sometimes feel nervous of being offered support.

A nervous person might pause before responding to you, don't rush in to fill that pause unless it goes on for a long time and then you can remind them who you are and why you are calling.

You cannot listen and hear the right messages from the person you are phoning unless you are able to build up a good relationship and rapport



The main purpose of your call is **to be supportive**, but you might also want to get some information from the other person.

Gently ask open questions to encourage the person you are calling to talk.

We (Brits) often ask how someone is by way of a greeting, and get the auto-reply “OK”, “good thanks” etc. - if in doubt, challenge there and then by way of something like “Are you sure?”, “hmm. Convince me” in a concerned manner. It often works and is that little crack that enable someone to open up.

Try to work it so they talk more than you do!

Use your active listening skills, feedback, prompting, encouragement to underpin that process.



**Ask clear questions and be patient with answers,** especially with an obviously nervous person on the end of the phone.

Listen to their tone of voice, be gentle, give them space and time to speak.

Don't be afraid of silences, don't be too eager to talk if the caller is slow in responding to short questions from you.

Always give genuine answer to any questions asked of you. If they are genuine answers for you, they will sound genuine to the person you are speaking to.



Adopt a **positive tone** and speak clearly. The tone of voice will be instrumental in building up a trusting relationship for the person you are supporting.

Don't speak too fast when giving information or commenting. One suggestion is to speak at a rate of between 130 and 150 words a minute - but of course sometimes it needs to be slower and bring a calming and supportive edge.

If you have a strong regional accent and are speaking to someone whose accent is completely different you may need to speak slightly slower to enable yourself to be understood.

The person you are talking to can pick up emotions in your voice – e.g. anger, amusement. The tone of voice you use can contribute to the success of the conversation.



Sometimes the person you call will be experiencing **stress** . The person will want to share painful and difficult issues for them. Make sure your body language is right, don't fiddle with papers or keypad, don't look around – even though you are on the end of a phone, the caller can pick up whether you are attending to them. Keep your voice even and not “tragic” or “dramatic”.

Make sure you never turn the conversation back to you “I know how you feel” You do not know how another person feels, only they do. Do not tell stories about yourself even if you have experienced similar things unless you are specifically asked. Then keep the story brief and turn the conversation back to the person you are speaking to as quickly as possible, so the emphasis is not on you but on them.



**Do not try to give solutions.** Your solution may not be the right solution for the person you are talking to.

Encourage the person to talk about their issues and feelings, prompt and help the person to explore solutions.

Give alternatives if you can but be clear they are alternatives not advice. Do not tell them what to do – it closes people down emotionally and they can feel bullied and disempowered by your attempt to problem-solve for them.

Ask open questions and don't try to rush them off the phone because you suddenly think you have run out of time. Don't call someone without knowing you have time.



Sometimes you will need to help to **close a conversation** especially when the other person a caller finds it difficult to end. Assure people of further support including giving people the times when you might call again. Don't say I will call you sometime! Always keep your promise to call back. Be patient, kind but also firm and do not feel bad about closing a conversation if necessary.



### **Key Final Point**

**Providing support by phone can be demanding, tiring and sometimes upsetting.**

Contact those who provide you with Support, the Group Almoner, who can help you debrief encounters with people who touch a raw nerve, or upset you, or who leave you feeling inadequate. It happens to us all at some point. Particularly now when COIV-19 is causing us all stress and uncertainty.

**Look after yourself, please!**



**This is not intended to be an exhausted nor complete piece of training about phone calls but we hope it is helpful to assist you if you are involved in supporting Brethren and their families by phone at this time..**

**If you wish to discuss this further or set up a small training event to share ideas please contact Jamie Gwatkin, Provincial Grand Almoner**



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# Provincial Grand Lodge of Suffolk

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Thank You