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**MODULE SIX**

**Conflict management and  
problem solving**

**Contents**

* Understanding anger
* Responding to difficult behaviour
* Managing conflict
* Solving problems

**Overview**

This module will give participants skills for dealing with some of the difficult issues young people experience and the behaviours they might present, such as anger and aggression.

Participants are encouraged to be better prepared to support young people by learning strategies to deal with these behaviours, such as managing conflict and solving problems.

**Duration**

This module is designed to be completed in 75 to 90 minutes.

**Learning outcomes**

By the end of this session participants will have a greater understanding of some of the difficult emotions experienced by young people, and the expression of those emotions through behaviours that may be encountered within the mentoring relationship. Participants will have the strategies and techniques to deal with these situations.

**Resources**

* Handout 6.1 - How we express anger
* Handout 6.2 - Managing difficult behaviour
* Handout 6.3 - Managing conflict
* Handout 6.4 - Problem solving

**Running sheet**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Topic** | **Activity** | **Duration (approx.)** |
| **Overview** | *This module will give participants skills for dealing with some of the difficult issues young people experience and the behaviours they might present, such as anger and aggression.*  *Participants are encouraged to be better prepared to support young people by learning strategies to deal with these behaviours, such as managing conflict and solving problems.* | 2 mins |
| **Understanding anger** | * Explain that the key to dealing with difficult behaviour is to understand the reason behind it. Define passive, aggressive, indirect and assertive behaviours (Handout 6.1) * Refer participants to Handout 4.1 for more detail on these behaviours   ***Activity: Understanding anger***  Ask participants to write the names of five people they know and identify how these people deal with uncomfortable situations and/or conflict (i.e. are they passive, aggressive, indirect or assertive?) | 10 mins  10 mins |
| **Responding to difficult behaviour** | * **Brainstorm session:** Sometimes mentors have to manage a young person’s anger and the difficult behaviour associated with it. What are some of the ways you would respond to a young person displaying anger? * Acknowledge responses and highlight other ideas on ‘Managing difficult behaviour’ (Handout 6.2)   ***[Optional] Activity: Difficult behaviour role play***  Divide participants into pairs and use the following statements in a role-play scenario. Suggest participants use the strategies detailed above in their responses. (*Activity continued next page*)  (*Activity continued*)  ‘This sucks. I hate doing this stuff. You’re so boring!’  ‘Don’t tell me what to do. Screw you. You’re not my mum/dad.’  ‘How would you know? You’ve never been through this. You’re old!’  ‘I hate them. It’s not fair. Everyone at school can get lost.’  ***[Optional] Activity: Difficult behaviour in Groups***  If your mentoring program involves group activities, ask participant to discuss or role play what they might do if two young people begin arguing. | 15 mins  [15 mins]  *[10 mins]* |
| **Managing conflict** | * **Brainstorm session:** What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of conflict? * Highlight any additional advantages and disadvantages from the handout. Review the formula for managing conflict (Handout 6.3) | 15 mins |
| **Problem solving** | * Introduce the problem-solving model (Handout 6.4)   ***Activity: Managing conflict and problem solving***  This activity aims to provide an opportunity to put into action learnings from the conflict-resolution and problem-solving handouts.  Divide participants into pairs to role play problem-solving scenarios using the following case study. One participant is the young person and the other the mentor.  (NB: this activity could be done as a brainstorm session if participants struggle with role plays).  Encourage participants to use the conflict-resolution and problem-solving handouts to assist them.  (*Activity continued next page)*  (*Activity continued*)  **Case study:** *Amina is 19 years old and came to Australia from Somalia 18 months ago. She lives with her mother and three younger brothers in a housing estate flat.*  *One day her mentor meets up with Amina, who is very upset. She says that she and a friend got matching tattoos at the weekend and that her mother is very angry and wants her to leave home.*  *Amina doesn’t want to leave, and really wants her mum to understand that she lives in Australia now and that things are different here. She asks her mentor what she should do.* | 5 mins  20 mins |

HANDOUT 6.1

How we express anger

**We may feel angry when: **

* our rights have possibly been violated
* we are threatened with loss
* we feel powerless and not respected

Many people, including young people, are angry because they feel used or pushed around. Anger has a real purpose in our lives but needs to be managed, not ignored.

When you experience anger, your body goes into a fight-or-flight response; that is, you want to attack or run away. Anger can be expressed through the following behaviours.

**Passive behaviour**

Some people escape by being passive. They ignore their rights or allow others to violate them. They don’t express their needs, feeling and ideas. They allow others to choose or make decisions for them. Many people become resentful or angry with themselves.

Passive behaviour reduces self-esteem and is less likely to earn the respect of others. It may invite others to exploit or bully the person who is displaying passive behaviour.

**Aggressive behaviour**

Aggressive behaviour can be triggered by extreme anger or anxiety. A person may be standing up for their rights, but in doing so they attack others, violate others’ rights, or force decisions on them.

Following aggressive behaviour, a person may experience guilt about dominating or humiliating another person, and the aggressor’s self-respect diminishes. Constant aggressive behaviour leads to ineffective relationships.

**Assertive behaviour**

Assertive people stand up for their rights without attacking or violating others’ rights. They make choices and decisions and give others the same right. Healthy self-assertion does not mean forcing opinions or decisions on others, or vice versa. Having been assertive, people feel calmer and their self-respect and confidence grow.[[1]](#footnote-1)

HANDOUT 6.2

Managing difficult  
behaviour

Sometimes mentors have to manage anger and the difficult behaviours associated with it. Anger may be self-directed or expressed towards a particular person or the world in general.

**Responding to difficult behaviour**

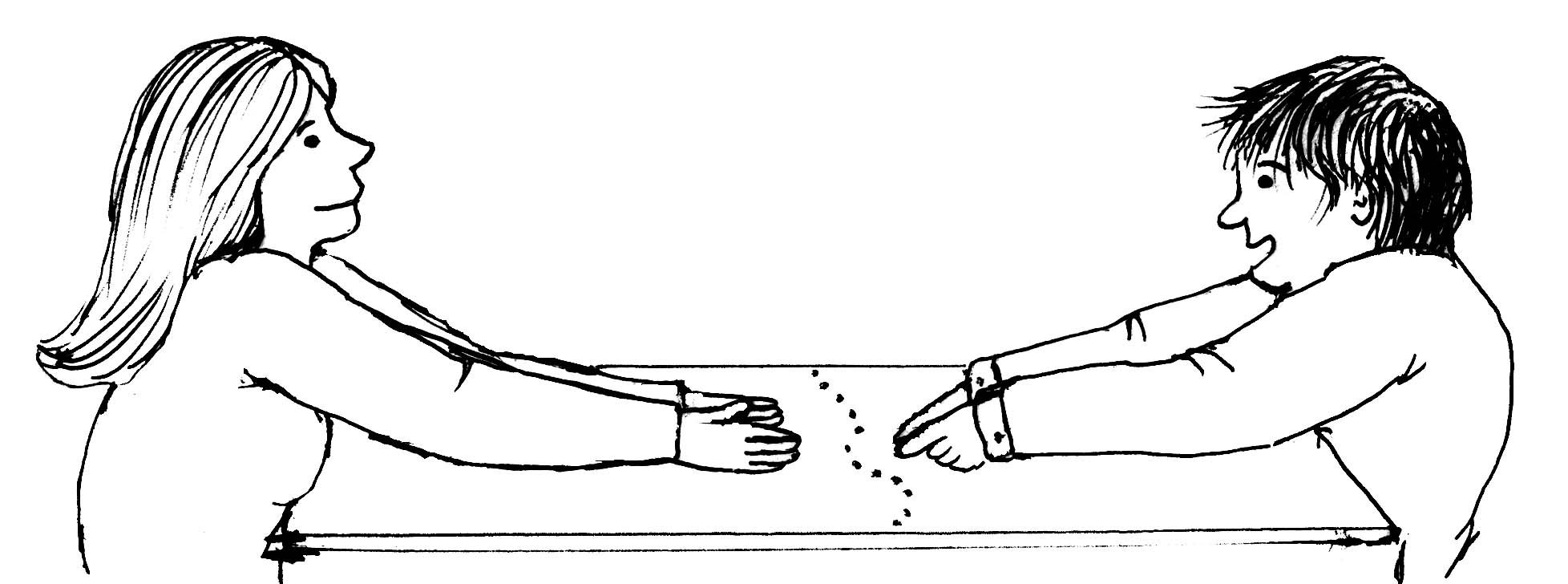
In inflamed and emotive situations how things are perceived may be temporarily distorted because thoughts are highly charged. In these situations it is useful to take a deep breath and try to stay calm so that problems can be addressed in a way that protects the relationship.

* Using a calm tone of voice and just being ‘ordinary’ can help relax people. ‘Let’s go get a coffee and talk about this.’
* A calm, assertive statement about listening and trying to find an answer to the problem is a good way to go. ‘Tell me what the problem is. Maybe together we can find a solution.’
* Mentors should try not to take the anger personally (even if it is personal), and should stick with ‘I-messages’ and low-key language (see examples below).
* Mentors should keep the focus on the issue and not be sidetracked.
* Mentors should not try to change the young person’s mind by arguing or debating – a person who is angry is less likely to respond to logic or reason.

**How to make things worse**

* Criticise or insult people with ‘you-messages’. ‘You’re being really silly about this.’
* Try to make them feel guilty. ‘You’re not the only person who has rights here.’
* Insist on the supremacy of logical argument. ‘Don’t you realise that ...?’
* Interrogation. ‘Did that really happen? Are you sure?’
* Empty reassurance. ‘I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think.’
* Inappropriate humour. ‘Guess who got out of the bed on the wrong side!’

**Additional tactics**

* An angry person usually needs and benefits from more personal space.
* Body language needs to match verbal language. A relaxed stance says the mentor is listening and calm.
* Eye contact shows interest and attention but staring can increase anxiety.

**Summing up**

The ability to not take on other people’s issues enables mentors to step back from difficult behaviour. It allows them to see the behaviour for what it really is, while assisting the other person to understand their own behaviour.

The young person may be exploring their values and might experience some conflict while sorting this out. An important way the mentor can assist is to negotiate with the young person about how they will treat each other, and to keep consistent expectations about behaviour within the mentoring relationship.

**Young people need to know that there are:**

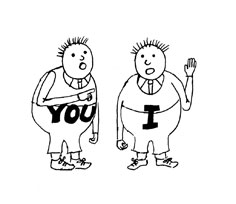
* clear and fair expectations, and definite limits about acceptable behaviour
* consequences for inappropriate behaviours
* sometimes disagreements within relationships, which also provide opportunities for understanding and honesty without hostility.

**Using I-messages instead of you-messages**

You-messages are likely to inflame a situation because they are generally hostile, threatening or hang an unflattering label on the other person.

I-messages are about owning your feelings and being assertive when describing them, without seeking to harm the other person.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***You-message*** | ***I-message*** |
| ‘What you said about me to … was pretty nasty. You’re a low scumbag.’ | ‘I don’t like things being said about me behind my back. It doesn’t make either of us look good. Please don’t do that again.’ |
| ‘You never let me do anything for myself. You’re a real control-freak.’ | ‘I want to be able to do it myself. If I get it wrong, so what? People learn by making mistakes.’[[2]](#footnote-2) |

HANDOUT 6.3  
Managing conflict

Conflict is usually about values, beliefs and needs and may occur when people have opposing interests or opinions. Behaviours resulting from conflict may include arguments, fights or disagreements that may be verbal or physical.

Formal conflict resolution is a skill for trained counsellors, but everyone can learn to manage conflict by practising a few personal skills.

**Advantages of conflict:**

* brings about change
* presents an opportunity to learn
* encourages a person to do better
* helps people to see and understand differences
* helps people to become more flexible
* ****clears the air and helps people to move on.

**Disadvantages of conflict:**

* people can become hurt
* people can become angry
* people can become confused
* it can be scary
* it can stop people taking risks.

**A formula for mentors managing conflict[[3]](#footnote-3)**

***Step 1: Treat the person with respect***

• Address the behaviour, not the person.

• Use appropriate language. Don’t swear.

• Don’t dismiss their concerns.

***Step 2: Listen until you experience the other side***

• The goal is to understand the other person’s thoughts and ideas.

• Understand content. What meaning do you think it has for them?

• What feelings do you think they are experiencing?

***Step 3: State your feelings, needs and views briefly***

• State your point of view.

• Avoid loaded questions.

• Say what you mean and mean what you say.

• Disclose your feelings.

***Step 4: Move on to problem solving if required***

HANDOUT 6.4

Problem solving

Some young people can have limited problem-solving skills. Mentors can use the following model to solve problems with young people and to help them to improve their problem-solving skills.

**Define the problem**

Begin with wants. What does the young person want? If it’s a big problem, it may need to be broken down into sub-problems that can be looked at one at a time.

**Brainstorm possible solutions**

Come up with as many solutions as possible, without criticism or evaluation of the suggestions. To relieve tension a mentor might throw in some deliberately silly solutions, if they feel the young person would be comfortable with this.

**Evaluate the possibilities**

Go down the list of solutions, noting the pros and cons and the probable consequences of each one. Write them down if it helps.

**Select the solution**

Explore whether one solution emerges as the best option. Does one clearly have more pros?

***1. Plan the solution***

Explore who will do what and by when. Are there resources needed? Who will get them and how?

***2. Implement the plan***

Do it. If it works, great. If it doesn’t, figure out why, and start back at whichever step you need to.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Case study**

Amina is 19 years old and came to Australia from Somalia 18 months ago. She lives with her mother and three younger brothers in a housing estate flat. One day you meet up with Amina and she is very upset. She tells you that she and a friend got matching tattoos at the weekend and that her mother is very angry and wants her to leave home. Amina doesn’t want to leave, and really wants her mum to understand that she lives in Australia now and that things are different here. She asks you what she should do.

1. Adapted from *MOIRA Mentor Training Manual*, Moorabbin, Victoria: South Directions Youth Service. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adapted from *MOIRA Mentor Training Manual*, Moorabbin, Victoria: South Directions Youth Service. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bolton, R., 1986. *People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts,* Florida: Touchstone Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Adapted from the ‘Gippsland Mentoring Alliance Training Package’, Trafalgar, VIC: Gippsland Mentoring Alliance. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)