



PILLAR 3. POSITIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication is a skill that is fundamental to success in volleyball. We need to be able to communicate to each other on the court so that we work together as a team. However, communication off the court is just as important - we need to ensure that positive communication skills are practiced and embedded by everyone involved in volleyball so that we create a positive and supportive environment.

Research has shown that members of the sport community are less likely to seek help due to complex factors, such as gender, sport culture, and ethnocultural reasons (Van Slingerland et al, 2018 and 2019). It is therefore important that we create a volleyball community that acknowledges these potential barriers to help-seeking. This means identifying ways to better communicate at all levels from recreational to high performance volleyball and to reduce stigma so participants will feel comfortable and open to speaking freely about mental health and wellness the way they would any other health domain such as sport injury or nutrition, for example.

In this section, we introduce information and techniques to create positive communication skills. By teaching and modelling new ways of communicating, you can enhance open and authentic conversations and create a culture of positive support. As a result individuals are much more likely to seek and receive the help they need to overcome mental health issues.

Tools and Templates in this Pillar

- 3.1 Cultivating Empathetic Communication in Volleyball
- 3.2 Active Listening Skills – Listening to Understand



Next Steps

- ✓ Share these handouts with other leaders in your organisation - empathetic communication can be used at the Board table just as much as it can be used to athletes.
- ✓ Seek out further learning or training on empathetic listening if you would like to learn more or share with others in your organisation.
- ✓ Integrate practicing empathetic communication into coach or leadership training. Role play with each other on typical scenarios that come up on or off the court. Learn from each other about what works well or where changes might be needed.
- ✓ Encourage athletes to practice empathetic communication and active listening within the team environment. For example, set questions for team members to reflect upon and then share their answers in pairs, practicing techniques for empathetic communication and active listening. Reward and acknowledge techniques when you see them take place on and off the court.

3.1 CULTIVATING EMPATHETIC COMMUNICATION IN VOLLEYBALL

Emotional intelligence (EI) has become an important part of sport coaching theory and practice in recent years, following the integration of emotional intelligence in almost every field of human performance from education to health care to law and order and the military. **Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage both your own emotions and understand the emotions of people around you.** There are five key elements to EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

Empathy, or the ability to detect and understand how others are feeling, is critical to this broader concept of emotional intelligence. Empathy involves more than just being able to recognize the emotional states of others. It also involves your responses to people based on this information. When we harness our empathy when we are communicating with another person, we open the door to understanding and to forming trusting relationships.

Mental health can be seen as a sensitive topic for many people, particularly in sport. Using an empathic communication style can be a very helpful way to open up lines of communication and to change culture around how we talk about mental health and wellness in the volleyball community.

What is empathetic communication?

Empathic communication is about being fully present, listening consciously, and hearing deeply. This can be a challenge at times - these skills may come easily for some people but not come as naturally for others. This is why it can be helpful for coaches, officials, parents, leaders, and peer athlete leaders to learn, model and teach these interpersonal life skills for use in and outside of sport.



Why is empathetic communication important?

Empathic communication serves a number of important purposes in and outside the sport environment:

1. It can create a psychologically safe environment. *“Psychological safety is key to ensuring people are able to thrive, feel engaged with what they do, and feel connected to something larger than themselves.”*
2. It can raise awareness about diversity and inclusion. *“Listening to understand another person’s lived experience and point of view, is a powerful step towards embracing diversity and inclusive spaces in sport.”*
3. It can restore the human element to the sometimes cut-throat world of competitive sport. *“We often forget the ‘human’ side to ‘human performance’ – communicating with empathy recalibrates us to being people first, athletes/coaches/officials second.”*

Steps to Practicing Empathic Communication

When examining your policies, use some of these best practices to create and review them with a “lens” of support and well-being:

- ✓ *“One moment, I am going to put away my phone. Let’s find a spot where you will be comfortable and we can focus well. This is important.”*
Be present – remove as many distractions as you can, in order to be as available in the moment as possible.
- ✓ *“I’m not an expert in this, but I care about you and I will do my best to be clear and support you.”*
Be Yourself – use your own authentic language and natural speaking style and language. This will put someone at ease (especially if they already know you)
- ✓ *“I want to make sure I understand how you are feeling. Is this what you meant? I have a few important questions to be sure.”*
Be curious and ask questions – ask questions to best understand the situation and what the person is going through at that moment.
- ✓ *“I heard you say that it is hard to come to practice these days, and you are really struggling with some personal issues. You feel like you might need some extra support. Did I hear everything correctly?”*
Be an active listener – listen to UNDERSTAND, not just to hear. Some ways to enhance this is to paraphrase what the person has said, and confirm back to them in your own words, so you can affirm that you understand where they are at, and what they are thinking and feeling (as best you can).
- ✓ *“I don’t know exactly how you are feeling, and everyone copes differently with big setbacks. What I do know is that it is very hard to manage, and we can talk about how you personally are feeling and what you are thinking.”*
Recognize other perspectives – As we are beginning a conversation (particularly one with a sensitive topic), we often will hear information that is contradictory to our way of thinking. This is even more common when we are talking with someone who may be experiencing a mental health challenge or an emergency. It is important to acknowledge this tension and differences in perspective, without diminishing the other person, and judging their perspective.
- ✓ **Embrace diversity** - There are many forms of human diversity and they are important to take into consideration in any conversation, not just one concerning mental health. Listening with an open mind to better understand where a person is coming from (particularly if they come from a marginalized community) is important in having an empathic conversation. For example: setting aside your own biases because you cannot fully understand how another person is feeling, particularly when you do not share the same background.
- ✓ *“Losing someone we love is incredibly painful. But feeling this pain is to be expected, and you are not alone in feeling this way, even though it may feel like it. I’m here to listen to whatever you feel comfortable telling me.”*
Validate – It is important when someone is sharing something that is difficult for them to express, that we meet them where they are. This is to say, someone is feeling or thinking a certain way and they want to be heard and understood. Validation can help build a bridge to better understanding and seeking help. We can help add to a sense of “normalizing” how they are feeling, while we avoid “minimizing” how they are feeling.

- ✓ *“I am here to listen and to see how I can help you. But I need you to know that if I am concerned for your safety – or the safety of anyone else – I may need to get more help.”*

Be honest – While we are listening with empathy, we are also listening with an authentic duty of care for another person’s safety. Be honest with them about your need to involve other steps if you are concerned about their safety or the safety of others.

All of these important tips for cultivating empathic communication above are particularly important when you are communicating with someone who is experiencing mental health challenges. You can use empathic listening when using some of the navigation tools in this toolkit, such as initiating a mental health emergency action plan (MHEAP), or building a mental health action plan (MHAP) for an individual.

Next Steps

- Share this handout with other leaders in your organisation - empathetic communication can be used at the Board table just as much as it can be used to athletes.
- Seek out further learning or training on empathetic listening if you would like to learn more or share with others in your organisation.
- Integrate practicing empathetic communication into coach or leadership training. Role play with each other on typical scenarios that come up on or off the court. Learn from each other about what works well or where changes might be needed.
- Encourage athletes to practice empathetic communication and active listening within the team environment. For example, set questions for team members to reflect upon and then share their answers in pairs, practicing techniques for empathetic communication and active listening. Reward and acknowledge empathetic communication and active listening techniques when you see them take place.



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3.1 ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS – LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

A complementary skill to empathic communication is using an **active listening style**. This can be incredibly important when you are trying to cultivate open conversations about mental health, and creating supportive and safe environments in volleyball.

What is Active Listening?

Constructive communication involves active listening, being genuine, and having empathy. Active listening is a particular structured way of listening and responding to others. When actively listening, your attention is focused on the other person in an attempt to understand, interpret, and evaluate what they are communicating to you. An important part of this is trying to listen without judgment.



Tips for Enhancing Active Listening

- **Eye Contact:** Do your best to make and maintain eye contact. Also bear in mind that in some cultures, excessive eye contact can be seen as dominating, aggressive, or rude. Be present and focussed but do not stare.
- **Focus:** Focus on what is being said. Remove other distractions like phones, computers, or other tasks you may have been doing.
- **Give space to the speaker:** Listen and allow the other person to express themselves. Avoid interrupting them. You may feel strongly that you want to “fix” things, but you must try and hear the entire situation from their perspective, and the primary focus is trying to understand the core issues at hand first.
- **Allow for pauses or breaks:** Some people may need time to think and reflect, particularly when discussing a difficult or distressing issue. Do not pressure someone to answer quickly.
- **Ask questions if you do not understand:** If something is not clear, asking for more detail in a friendly and non-judgmental way shows that you are genuinely interested and are concerned.
- **Repeat or paraphrase for confirmation and deeper understanding:** When you repeat what you heard you may reduce misunderstandings or confusion. Allow the other person to confirm or correct your interpretation.
- **Reflect:** Reflect on what you heard in order to take next steps. If appropriate, you could also take some time and space, however be clear with the individual that you will circle back.
- **Listen to what is not being said:** Listen between the lines by reading body language that might show how the person is feeling (posture, facial expressions, eye contact, etc.).

Next Steps

- Share this handout with other leaders in your organisation – active listening can be used at the Board table just as much as it can be used to athletes.
- Seek out further learning or training on active listening if you would like to learn more or share with others in your organisation.
- Integrate practicing active listening into coach or leadership training. Role play with each other on typical scenarios that come up on or off the court. Learn from each other about what works well or where changes might be needed.
- Encourage athletes to practice empathetic communication and active listening within the team environment. For example, set questions for team members to reflect upon and then share their answers in pairs, practicing techniques for empathetic communication and active listening. Reward and acknowledge empathetic communication and active listening techniques when you see them take place.