



Guidelines for making a phone call to a much older person

Everyone at Kissing it Better is contacting a least one older person they know almost every day, mainly as a way of keeping in touch but also as a positive way of lifting their spirits. So many people who have been forced to self-isolate are incredibly lonely as well as anxious, not simply as someone who is in the 'higher risk' category linked to COVID-19, but also because they are also anxious about the health and wellbeing of their younger relatives.

We are not asking DofE students, and other students keen to get some valuable volunteering experience whilst at home, to get involved in those anxieties, but instead to think creatively of what they plan to talk about, before they pick up the phone, so that can make the person on the other end of the phone not only smile but also feel valued because that young person took the time to share their stories.

So, here are some key thoughts that might be useful

1. Make sure you don't sound rushed. Before you pick up the phone, ensure it is a time that works for you. People can tell if you sound like you want to get the phone call over quickly, especially some older people who may be particularly sensitive about someone phoning them because they have been asked to do it. Please make sure you listen, however long a story takes to tell. No one wants to feel rushed.
2. Always start by asking if it is a good time to call. Although many older people are lonely they may well have certain things they do during the day at certain times. They may be preparing or eating a meal, about to watch, or already watching a favourite TV programme or about to have a rest. They may have just finished a long conversation with someone else and want a bit of a break before they talk to you.
3. Many older people have some hearing issues so please ask, from the start, if they can hear you clearly. That may mean speaking slightly louder and/or more slowly and clearly. Ask if they can adjust the volume button on their phones as that could make a huge difference. If it is not a good line, ring them back.
4. Eliminate any background noises. Music, TVs, other people talking, cooking or working in the same room are all distractions that can make a phone conversation much more challenging for someone who is older.
5. It is good to start with a general question about how they are. They may say they are fine but that doesn't always mean they are. Often people offer that response because they don't want to share their feelings at that moment. So, for example, if they say they are very lonely and miss not seeing their children/grandchildren etc., it may not be good to launch into a story about the amazing fun your family are able to have because you are all together at the moment. Those stories can be told but at a more appropriate moment.
6. If you mention your 'Duke of Edinburgh's Award' experience, we suggest you don't tell them the phone call is part of it. That can make people believe that you are only ringing for your own benefit. With things as they are at the moment, it is perfectly reasonable to ask if they remember self-isolating as a child due to quarantine for mumps, measles diphtheria etc., or how they felt when they, or their friends were evacuated during the war. As long as it doesn't upset them, tell them that those stories have been really helpful and would they mind if you use them as part of your DofE work.
7. At the moment, every day feels the same so don't be surprised if they don't know what day of the week it is. Also, at the moment, with little new to talk about, we are all in danger of repeating things we have already said. Be patient.

8. Many older people do not want to talk about being old. They would far rather share stories of their younger days and the trouble they got into as children. Many had much more freedom than children do today and got into many 'scrapes'. Sharing mischievous stories of things they got up to as children can make them smile as they remember happier times.
9. Share your stories too. You are likely to find a lot of things you have in common. For example, you have a mobile phone. Many older people spent hours making 'phones' out of two tin cans (or two plastic cups) and a piece of string. They also read The Beano, a comic that in some cases has the same characters as it had nearly 80 years ago when it was first published. They may also have loved similar books such as Winnie the Pooh, Just William, Paddington, Alice in Wonderland etc.
10. Always end the call by thanking the person for giving you so much of their time. Once the call has ended, write down the highlights before you forget. This will help you when you are evidencing to your DofE leader that you made those calls. Consider what you learned from this first-hand information. Do you think you are more likely to remember it than you if you had read those stories in a book?

Finally, If the person at the other end of the phone is on email, send them a quick message so say how much you enjoyed the conversation and what it meant to you. You don't have to do this but it may make them smile. We all want to feel we have been useful and older people often get less chance to have that opportunity as they become increasingly dependent on other people.

ISSUES THAT SHOULD BE SHARED WITH A RESPONSIBLE PERSON IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD

1. If they start talking about their health because they have symptoms (not necessarily about coronavirus) that bother them, do not give any advice. Everyone is different and those are questions for someone with expertise to handle
2. Report any conversation that strays into any other area that makes you feel uncomfortable, in any way. Some older people who have dementia may have lost the filter that stops us saying things we shouldn't say. Very occasionally, it may be more serious than that.
3. Some older people muddle facts when telling stories. If they tell you something that upsets you, please tell your parents. If what they tell you is not quite correct, try to avoid correcting them if they are enjoying telling the story, unless it seriously bothers you.

Finally, a huge thank you for what you are doing

You do not have to call every day but do make a commitment do phone regularly. If, for some reason, you have to move the time, please let the person you are calling know.

When very old people die, people tell stories about their lives at their funerals. Often when everyone gathers together afterwards, they say that they never knew many of those stories and now it's too late to ask the person about them. Older people are often embarrassed to list their achievements to their own family and friends their age, but they are happy to tell young people as they feel they are not only educating them about another time, they are also reminding them that they were once young too.

