

# Speaking Up

Professor Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as  
*‘a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking - that we can feel safe to express ourselves or speak up.’*

We asked you to share your experiences and thoughts around speaking up.  
Thank you to those who got in touch – we really appreciate it.

# Common themes

## Barriers to speaking up

- Fear of consequences
- Nothing changed last time
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of confidentiality
- Rudeness and aggression
- Lack of support

## Positive impacts of speaking up

- Relief
- Increased self-confidence
- Improved relationships
- More positive experience for others

# Some questions to ponder ...

As you read what colleagues have shared with us, we encourage you to reflect upon the following questions and make a personal commitment:

- If these issues were being raised with you, as a manager or a colleague, how would you want to respond?
- How could you create psychological safety for those who currently feel unable to raise concerns?
- How well do you “listen up” when someone else is speaking up, and how do you show it?

I've previously spoken up and felt that while listened to nothing happened, nothing changed and the situation remained tense and horrible until the other staff member eventually left but did leave behind a lot of disconnect in the team that took more than a year to get over. I think sometimes managers need to spend more time, day in day out with the team to get a feel for the underlying currents and tensions. I also think more feedback on actions taken / the outcome could be beneficial - although I am aware that obviously there are confidentiality issues surrounding that.

There is a massive bullying culture, from top down. We are encouraged to Datix if short staffed or there has been near misses then pulled aside and informed in a rude and aggressive manner that unless anything actually happens we should not be completing them. It doesn't encourage you raise concerns or speak up.

I work in a very small team. That means even if you raise an issue in general terms it's usually fairly clear who it is directed at which is then awkward and so you generally suffer in silence instead.

Being autistic, I am very aware that clear communication is not my forte and that I get very emotional very quickly in situations I find confrontational. I very quickly go into fight or flight mode. Knowing that even a simple conversation can escalate to that means I tend to avoid starting a difficult conversation.

It's difficult to stand up and raise a concern when you've tried before and when I did actually do that I didn't feel like it made any difference to the situation or possibly made it worse, so I'm even less likely to do it again.

At the same time, if managers / team leads are not aware something is wrong they definitely cannot do anything to help. I just don't have faith that help will happen if you do say something.

We are told that we can ask for help when under pressure, unable to cope and are short staffed and then made to feel like it really doesn't matter as no one is prepared to help and can be quite hostile when asking for help for the safety of the patients and staff. When you're already stressed this isn't helpful – why would I want to speak up?

I'm very aware that as I have aged and moved into and through the menopause phase of my life my self-confidence has significantly decreased. The effects of being a menopausal woman - brain fog, inability to recall names/words and my overall decreased eloquence when speaking spontaneously in an open forum have all led to my reluctance to engage in the way I previously did.

In conjunction with these feelings is the nagging recollection that in the past I and others have referred to colleagues, who on reflection have also been experiencing the same challenges, as being "time expired" and that by sharing my spontaneous thoughts I may well attract the same label. How others perceive me professionally has always been very important to me

My gut feeling tells me that in an organization with 17,000 employees there must be many women who like me require to work until way past the original retirement age of 60 and perhaps these barriers to speaking up warrant some recognition as part of the October Speak Up month.

I didn't like how was being spoken to. I plucked up the courage to tell the person. I was shaking with fear – but they listened and apologised. I'm so glad I spoke up and others don't have to suffer the same way.

It was a hostile, non-supportive place to work where most staff are just waiting for something bad to happen and then be told they should have highlighted the risks sooner by the very people who have shut down any of their concerns previously.

I have seen staff being told that they are letting the team down for being sick. I have seen constant inappropriate gossiping from senior staff of why people are off sick. It doesn't encourage you to share or be open about things, and that impacts on how we work together and the care we give.

I was asked to chair a group of mixed levels of staff seniority, a multi-disciplinary team and a true cross-section of skills and knowledge from around the system. I was fairly new to chairing meetings and was excited at the opportunity for my development and the experience it would provide.

The meetings were dire; undesirable behaviours, nobody stepping up to take action, no support i.e. deliberate undermining, and certainly were not going to achieve objectives. One meeting was particularly bad and I was upset and angry at how I had been spoken to in the meeting from a senior member of staff.

After some reflection I thought about a course I recently attended and I decided to take action to address this.

I searched on line to source a meeting etiquette poster and together with a summary of our NHS values - Caring, Listening, Improving - and what they meant to live them I printed off copies for everyone at the next meeting.

I started the meeting in the usual way but before discussing the agenda items and the business, I shared the papers I had printed off. I suggested we all took on board the behaviours and values and agree on how the meetings were going to be conducted going forward.

You could have heard a pin drop! I felt sick with nerves but the meeting progressed without incident and the change in approach and attitude in the meeting that day was remarkable.

After the meeting I had a knock on my office door and a member of staff from the meeting came in to apologise. They asked if it was their behaviour that had sparked that reaction from me. I had said it was the group in general but their behaviour had not been helpful.

This felt like a huge step for me, an accomplishment, success. I had set out to make change and hold the group accountable for their behaviours and it had worked. It was a big thing for me to do and I felt happy it had turned out well. The main driver pushing me on was I could not have not done anything about it, as then it would have just continued. I had to do something as doing nothing would be accepting and condoning the behaviours.

Soon after that and at the first opportunity I had, I left that group. However it has stuck with me and looking back I feel I did do the right thing and more importantly at the right time.

# Speaking Up and Listening Up

‘Enabling people to speak up is now an imperative to reduce the risk of wrong-doing as well as to access vital knowledge and ideas from employees.’

*Megan Reitz*

## **Our question to you:**

What will you do now to make it safe for others to speak up and feel supported and listened to when they do?

Please share with us your personal commitments to speaking up and listening up, on [gram.culturematters@nhs.scot](mailto:gram.culturematters@nhs.scot)

*Let's all work together to make it safe and encouraging for everyone to speak up!*

# Speaking Up and Listening Up

For support around Speaking Up and Listening Up, have a look at the resources on the NHS Grampian Speak Up 2022 webpage

[Speak Up Week 2022 \(nhsgrampian.org\)](https://nhsgrampian.org)

There are things to read, to watch and to listen to; and contact details for useful networks and contacts.