**Barriers to Communication**

There can be a number of factors that hinder good communication and it is up to the mentor to remove them if they arise during your mentoring sessions. Here are some that you may come across:

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| **Assumption** | The assumption that you know what they are going to say or assume that what they say is worthless. You need to break down a barrier within the learner who could believe older people think that they have nothing of value to say. You want them to believe that you are interested in what they are saying and welcome their views and thoughts. |
| **Prejudice & Bias** | These are blockages to listening and we all have them. Pointless prejudices such as on the basis of race or religion etc. have no place in the Mentoring Scheme. But there are others that are our own and personal to us and we often don’t know where these prejudices come from but we pick them up and they are all around us. Sometimes parents give them to us. An example of this could be when a male child cries his mother says “big boys don’t cry”. When that child is grown up and sees a man cry he may have the attitude that the person could not be a real man because he is crying.  Look at your own prejudices and be aware of them. You might walk into a room and spark a prejudice. It could be because of how you are dressed, the sound of your voice or just the look of you. Any little thing like this could cause a barrier between you and your learners. If you become aware of this in your learners, don’t be frightened to challenge it and question **why** they think like that. |
| **Environment** | Noise, too hot or too cold. You can manipulate the environment to make people feel either more comfortable or very uncomfortable. The environment is a resource. For example a difficult meeting in an office where the manager makes sure the employee is sitting on a lower chair to deliberately make them feel talked down to.  When working with your learners be aware of the environment you are both in. Obviously you have to work within the area that the school or college have given you and it might not be ideal, but is there anything you could do to make that environment more comfortable? For example, think about how you might sit at a desk with your learner, rather than sitting directly opposite each other (like a formal interview) would your learner perhaps feel more comfortable sitting alongside you or at a 45° angle around the corner of a desk? |
| **Different personalities** | It might be that they just don’t like you. It happens to all of us. We all go through life meeting people that we just don’t like. Your learner might not like you. You could walk through the door and their reaction might be “I don’t like that one get me another one”. If you do get this extreme and very rare response, don’t forget that your university co-ordinator understands. Sometimes it just will not work and you will have to let go and move on. If you find yourself in this situation, talk to your university co-ordinator who will deal with the situation for you. If one of your learners persistently fails to attend, ask the school, college or academy co-ordinator to replace them with another learner and speak to your university co-ordinator. |

Don’t forget that your learners have every right to an opinion that might be opposite to yours. That is not a reason to say “we don’t get on”, just agree to differ and get on with it.

**Barriers to Learning**

As well as barriers to communication with your learners you may also come across barriers to their progression and learning. This is what Aimhigher activity is all about; helping young people remove barriers to their own progression through education and therefore giving them every opportunity to achieve their potential. **Related Activity: ‘The Consequences Matrix’ available from** [**www.aimhigherwm.ac.uk/mentoring-scheme/generic-resources-and-activities**](http://www.aimhigherwm.ac.uk/mentoring-scheme/generic-resources-and-activities)

Here are some barriers you may come across which all need very careful handling:

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| **Previous negative experience** |
| These are things that happen to us when we are young that condition us as to how we think about ourselves and our own abilities. The following are some examples:  A young person may say **“I’m no good”,** because they feel they are not learning as much as the people around them. What this can actually mean is that the young person is unable to learn as the methods used may not be appropriate for them. We know for example that boys and girls learn differently.  Another phrase a young person might come up with is **“this is not for people like me”.** This raises issues around their own feelings about where they do and don’t belong. But where have those feelings come from? Has somebody else told them they don’t belong and they have believed it? Where ever this has come from it is a real feeling/view that needs to be addressed.  Other people can give you a label. An example of this could be a teacher that says **“your brother was a nuisance so you must be too”**.  Bullying may be playing a part in the way a young person thinks about themselves. We all know that some children can make life miserable for others. Any label can act as a barrier. Another is the child believing they are from the poorest family. This young person has enormous barriers to overcome and eventually that young person can start to use the label as an excuse – “ah well, I’m from a poor family you know”. The message here is, therefore you cannot expect me to perform. |
| **Family/Home** |
| **“Blame the parents”** – this is something we often hear today. Mentors must be careful as in some cases it is that parents cannot support rather than will not support.  Academically they just may not be able to keep up with their children. It is also very difficult for parents to accept that their children are in some way “better” than them. Some parents may make excuses. For example **“I need the table you will have to put that away”**, referring to their homework.  Of course there are parents who will not want to bother but do not assume that is always the case. Sibling pressure can also play a part in this. Mentors can be a resource to help deal with this situation, often by just questioning where these views have come from and then setting out on a journey with the learners to prove them wrong. |
| **Conditioned Response** |
| Believing **“I can’t do it”** because everybody has told them so or because they may have been ridiculed for being different. Therefore the child stops trying to have a go, instead choosing to accept that it is impossible. This is called learned helplessness.  Mentors can turn this around by creating an environment where they are able to say **– “have a go – it does not matter if you get it wrong. It is better to get it wrong than not try at all”.** However, as with everything else be careful with this. If it is hopeless don’t say it is good. Don’t keep going with it if you can see it is hopeless. Break it down and work on and concentrate more on the positive aspects. Encourage and use positive stroking. The warning is do not praise if it is wrong – help them get it right but praise the effort. |

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| **Disorganisation** |
| Disorganisation in learners can cause stress, confusion and lead to a decrease in motivation. Mentors can help their learners in becoming more organised. Target setting can be used as a tool to develop organisational skills. Mentors can also use their own experiences as a student to help their learners to deal with study workloads and help them to develop organisational skills which will be required for further studies and employment. |
| **Not getting along with teachers** |
| Not getting along with a teacher can lead to a decrease in motivation and interest in a subject. Mentors need to be careful in this area and not get caught in a drama triangle (i.e. fighting battles on behalf of their learners – see 3.13). Teachers can often be the barrier to progression/learning but there are always two sides to a story! Mentors should be very tactful and liaise with their university co-ordinator on this matter before proceeding. |
| **Peer pressure** |
| Peer pressure amongst pupils and friends is a common experience for learners at secondary school age. This needs to be dealt with very carefully. Mentors can support learners to develop self-confidence and awareness and therefore make choices that are right for them and not be influenced by pressures from their peers. |
| **Behaviour** |
| One of the greatest barriers to progression/learning is behaviour. Mentors should be aware of this fact and remember that their Learners may often demonstrate inappropriate behaviour. Setting mutually agreed ground rules will help to manage any unwanted behaviour. Mentors can also work closely with staff within the school to help support any behaviour management initiatives that their learners may be involved in. |

**Rackets (or encouraging positive thinking)**

Rackets are very powerful in confirming beliefs we have about ourselves. Understanding them will help you to understand your learners. Rackets can be described as when a young person has an unreasonable belief about themselves and their interaction with others. Examples of rackets can include;

* No other pupils like them,
* They will not pass their exams,
* Can’t get on with a teacher,
* HE is not for people like them,
* They are no good with computers/coursework/history….

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They are usually formed by a previous negative experience which leads to an unwillingness to accept that they can deal with a particular situation. It is your role to help break the racket and help give learners the confidence to tackle these issues themselves.

The interaction that you have with learners during your sessions can be described as an exchange of strokes. Using positive strokes will invite the learners to feel okay about themselves and others. Therefore to break down a racket you will need to consider positive stroking. This can be done by encouraging the learners to “have a go” with you providing the necessary support. Don’t forget using the right type of questions are also strokes. Paying attention to learners by asking for their opinions, concerns, ideas or their latest news are powerful ways of recognising them as a person and breaking down rackets.

Researching an area of interest for the learners is also positive stroking as they will appreciate the time and effort and the individual attention which is given to them. Again this is an effective way of building up their confidence. You could use a reflective activity such as a self-assessment **(available from** [**www.aimhigherwm.ac.uk/mentoring-scheme/generic-resources-and-activities**](http://www.aimhigherwm.ac.uk/mentoring-scheme/generic-resources-and-activities)**)** to discuss with learners, what about themselves? Can they identify what they would like to develop so that their perception could change? Discuss how changes might improve their achievement levels. Setting realistic and achievable short term targets can also be used to help achieve these outcomes.

**Mentor Commitment**

Just for a moment put yourself in the position of one of your learners:

*Your teacher has told you that you are going to get an Aimhigher Mentor to help you achieve your potential. A letter has gone home to your parents saying that you have been selected for the opportunity and they have agreed to let you take part. You meet your mentor for the first time at the launch of the scheme. Your mentor is great, you really get on and they talk to you in an understanding and caring way. You feel that they are really interested in helping you. They make arrangements for your session next week and you are actually looking forward to it.*

*The session comes, you turn up early and you wait but your mentor never arrives and eventually you get a message to say they are not taking part in the scheme any more.*

Can you imagine the devastating effect this scenario can have on the learner? You have given the impression that you are not interested enough to continue the relationship. All of the barriers that have been preventing the learner from progressing have just been re-enforced by your actions. Don’t do it! Once you have met your learners you should consider yourself well and truly committed.