

Medical Appraisal Scotland

[Audio transcription of IAC pre-course module]

Improving Appraisal Conversations

Refresher Appraiser workshop



Welcome to this introductory module ahead of attending our “Improving Appraisal Conversations” workshop, which is part of our Refresher Appraiser programme.

We’ll be introducing a few of the key techniques you’ll be using in the practice appraisal sessions. By the end of this module, you’ll have a clear idea of what to expect on the day, and how to prepare for it.

Aims of the day



Deepening the appraisal conversation



Learning new approaches to facilitate exploration



Experiential and practical

Images 5389, 5711 and 8274 from nhsscotlandphotolibrary.org

The focus of the workshop is on appraiser skills, learning new approaches to take into appraisal and refocusing our thinking into what the appraisal discussion is all about. It will be a more experiential day compared to our other training sessions offered, giving you more time to practice and try the new techniques in a safe and facilitated environment.

What you will bring on the day

- Completed module (pt1)
- Reviewed recommended videos (pt2)
- Consider an appraisal situation (as appraisee) for practice sessions

Image 2838921 from pixabay.com

All pre-course information is on our website:

<https://www.appraisal.nes.scot.nhs.uk/appraiser-training/refresher-programme/iac/>

We expect all participants to have completed both parts 1 and 2 of the module prior to attending the half-day workshop.

Most crucially, we ask all participants to consider an appraisal situation, as an appraisee, to bring to the mini appraisal practice sessions. Whilst usual confidentiality rules will apply, try to avoid heavy subject matters – remember, the day is about learning and trying out a new skill in a facilitated environment.

Skills and Techniques

- Based on coaching and mentoring models
- Not retraining as coaches or mentors
- Applicable techniques in appraisal

Image 2838921 from pixabay.com

The skills and tools we're going to explore draw on ideas you might recognise from coaching and mentoring. But just to be really clear — we're **not** retraining you to be coaches or mentors, and we're not asking you to follow any particular communication model. That's not the aim here.

What we're doing instead is looking at some of its practical skills and techniques, and thinking about how they can be used helpfully within an appraisal conversation. It's about taking what's useful, keeping it simple, and applying it in a way that fits comfortably with your role as an appraiser.

Appraisal Conversations & Active Listening



Before we dive into those skills and techniques, let's remind ourselves what an appraisal is...

Appraisal conversation: what it is...



- ✓ Annual conversation
- ✓ Respect, empathy and genuineness
- ✓ Appraisee agenda



- ✓ Appraiser facilitates insight / exploration
- ✓ Formative process
- ✓ Encourage reflection



- ✓ Structured and flexible
- ✓ Ethical practice

Images 5389, 5711 and 8274 from nhsscotlandphotolibrary.org

Medical appraisal is a once-a-year opportunity for the appraisee to sit down with a trained colleague who's there to listen. It's their conversation, and it should be led by what matters most to them.

That means coming to the discussion with respect, empathy and genuine interest. And let's be honest — that isn't always easy. Some appraisees may be under a lot of pressure, feel frustrated, or even seem a bit resistant to the appraisal process.

Your role is to help them get something useful from the conversation. To gently encourage them to reflect on what's going on for them right now. What's happening? How are things feeling? And how are they coping?

For many people, appraisal is one of the few spaces they get to pause and think. Try to help them make the most of that time. If things start to feel overwhelming, support them to step back — to reconnect with why they do what they do, and to think about how they might manage the situations they're facing.

There is a structure to appraisal, but there's also plenty of flexibility. How the conversation flows, and what you focus on, can vary. By letting the appraisee set the initial agenda, you give them permission to talk about what really matters to them.

Appraisal conversation: what it is **not**...

- × Performance review
- × Advising

- × Teaching
- × Instructing

- × Counselling
- × Comfortable chat



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It's also really helpful to remind ourselves what appraisal *isn't*.

First and foremost, medical appraisal is **not** a performance review. Yes, it feeds into revalidation, and what you write in the Form 4 does contribute to that process — but appraisal is only one of a number of contributing factors. Any performance concerns that sit outside of appraisal are picked up through other local processes.

So just to be absolutely clear — appraisal is **not** a performance review. That's the line manager's role, and that isn't you.

It's also not your job as the appraiser to tell someone what to do, or to fix the problem for them. You're not there to teach, instruct or advise solutions. That said, if an appraisee asks for specific support — and you've already explored their own thinking — it can sometimes be helpful to share a bit of your own experience. If you do that, always check first that they want it, and frame it as what's worked for *you*, rather than what's right for *them*. Let them decide what feels right in their situation.

And finally, appraisal isn't counselling — and it's certainly not meant to be just a comfortable chat. While there's a strong element of support, there's also a place for appropriate challenge. That might mean gently questioning someone's thinking or helping them see things differently — for example, when they focus on one negative comment in their MSF despite lots of positive feedback. Those moments are often where the most useful reflection happens.

True or false?



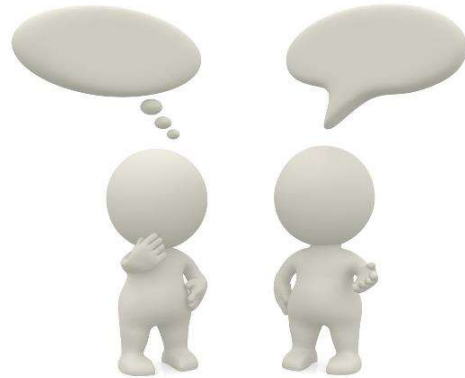
Talking = Communicating



Listening = Hearing



Hearing = Understanding



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So let us begin by challenging your perceptions and how we think about communication:

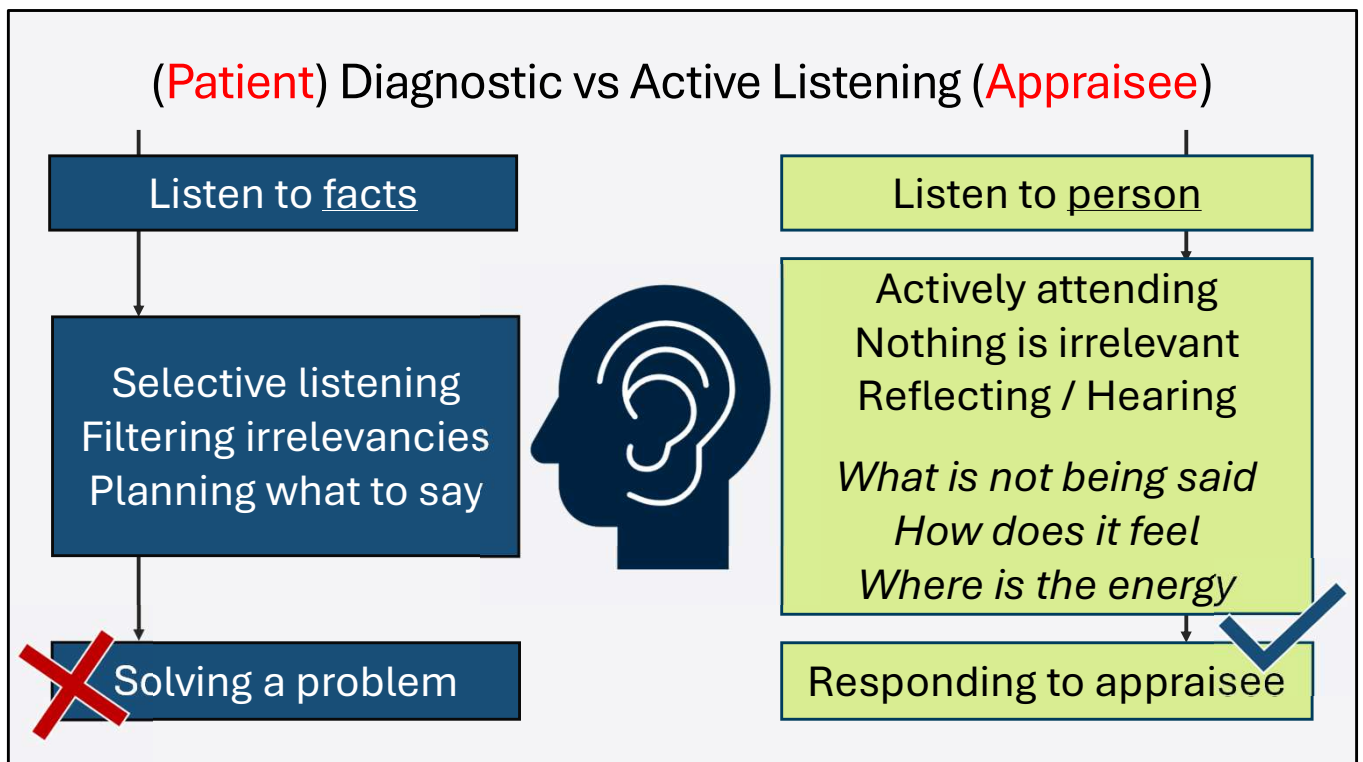
Does talking always mean we're really communicating?

And if we're listening, does that automatically mean we're actually hearing what the other person is saying?

And even if we're hearing the words — do we really understand where they're coming from?

In appraisal, there's a lot going on beneath the surface. It's not just about what's said, but how it's said, and what might not be said at all.

So let's move on and look at some techniques that help us listen more deeply — and really support both the hearing and the understanding.



Active listening is a really important skill for appraisers — but what do we actually mean by that?

As medics, we're all very familiar with diagnostic listening. We take a history, filter out what feels relevant, and start planning our next questions so we can solve the problem and reach an outcome. That works brilliantly with patients — but that's not what appraisal is about. Remember, your appraisee is **NOT** your patient.

In appraisal, the focus is on listening to the person. That means paying attention not just to what they're saying, but how they're saying it — their tone, their body language, and what's sitting underneath the words. In this space, **nothing** is irrelevant.

One really useful technique is simply reflecting back what you've heard. Saying it in your own words and checking you've understood them correctly. It helps you stay aligned and reassures the appraisee that they've been properly heard.

And it's also about listening between the lines. How does it feel? How are they coming across? Where's the energy in what they're saying?

With patients, the aim is diagnosis and a treatment plan, and that often means guiding the conversation quite actively. In appraisal, active listening is more about understanding where the appraisee is coming from — and helping them explore what's really going on, and what that means for them.

So as you're gathering information, remember — this is **NOT** about you finding the solution. It's about supporting your appraisee to explore things for themselves and work out what the right way forward looks like for **them**.

Opening up the Appraisal Conversation



Let's take a look at some techniques to open up the appraisal conversation.



Open up the appraisal conversation (1/3)

- Closed questions:
 - ✗ *Can you...? Do you...?*
 - Have you...? Are you...?*

Answer:
YES / NO

- Open questions:
 - ✓ *What...? Why...? Who...?*
 - Where...? How...*
 - Tell me...*

Answer:
a narrative

Image 5138 from nhsscotlandphotolibrary.org

Using open questions is one of the core skills of being an appraiser. You'll all have come across them in the New Appraiser training, but it's worth pausing for a reminder — partly because they're so simple, and partly because they're so powerful.

Appraisal is a formative experience. It's about exploring, not fixing. And that's where open questions really come into their own. A simple rule of thumb is this: if a question can be answered with a yes or a no, it's probably a closed question. Closed questions have their place — they're useful for checking facts — but they won't usually move the conversation forward.

Most of the time in appraisal, you're trying to open things out. So questions like, *"What's going on for you at the moment?"* or *"How are things feeling just now?"* or *"Who else might have a view on this?"* The what, the who, the when, the where and the how questions — these are the ones that invite a story. They give you context, and they help the appraisee think more deeply about what's really going on.

It's also worth paying attention to *how* you ask the question. Tone matters. Some "why" questions, in particular, can sound challenging or even confrontational if you're not careful. An inquisitive *"Why are you thinking this way?"* can open things up — whereas the same words, said abruptly, can shut the conversation down very quickly.



Open up the appraisal conversation (2/3)

- *What's going on?*
- *What's really going on?*
- *Different perspectives, past experience... how would others view this?*
- *Identify out of all that is discussed... what is really meaningful to the appraisee and valuable to explore further?*

Image 5138 from nhsscotlandphotolibrary.org

Some of the techniques we're going to look at might feel familiar — you'll often hear them talked about in mentoring or coaching. But just to be clear, we're not focusing on any particular models here. What we're really interested in are a few practical techniques that help the appraisee make the most of this reflective space and tell their story in their own way. And it usually starts with a very simple question: *"what's going on for you just now?"* That might be a complaint, a difficulty with a colleague, or something they're unsure how to move forward with.

Once you've got a sense of the issue, it's worth pausing and asking yourself — what's *really* going on here? Is this about wanting a different role, or is there something else underneath? Are they focused on the complaint itself, or are they actually feeling unhappy or stuck more generally? Often there's more beneath the surface than first appears.

One helpful way to explore that is by bringing in different perspectives. You might ask things like: *Have you been in a similar situation before? or How might others see this? What do your colleagues say? What would someone else in the team notice?*

As you do that, you'll naturally draw on skills you already know — open questions, reflecting back, summarising. Hearing their own words played back can be really powerful. People often realise, *"That's not quite what I meant,"* or *"I hadn't thought about it that way."*

And once you've explored what's really going on — and there may be a few different strands — it can be helpful to gently narrow things again. You might ask, *"Out of everything we've talked about, is there something that feels most meaningful to explore a bit further?"* That's often the point where real movement starts to happen.



Open up the appraisal conversation (3/3)

- Reflecting
- Paraphrasing
- Echoing key words
- Silence
- Identifying blind spots
- Summarising

Image 5138 from nhsscotlandphotolibrary.org

And these are some of the techniques you'll already be familiar with.

What's often surprising is just how simple — and how powerful — they can be. Something as straightforward as echoing back a key phrase can really open things up. An appraisee might say, *"I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed... it was an awful experience,"* and you simply reflect that back — *"Overwhelmed? Awful?"* — and then give them space to say more. Often, that's all it takes to move the conversation forward.

We also talk a lot about silence. And this isn't about awkward pauses — it's about being there supportively, giving the appraisee the space to think and reflect, rather than rushing in to fill the gap.

Another really powerful technique is helping people notice blind spots. Imagine an appraisee describing a situation entirely from their own perspective. You might gently ask, *"How do you think someone else in your team would describe this?"* That simple shift can help them see things differently and think about the impact on others.

And finally, never underestimate the value of summarising. Reflecting back what you've heard helps the appraisee hear their own story more clearly — and that, in itself, can be incredibly powerful.

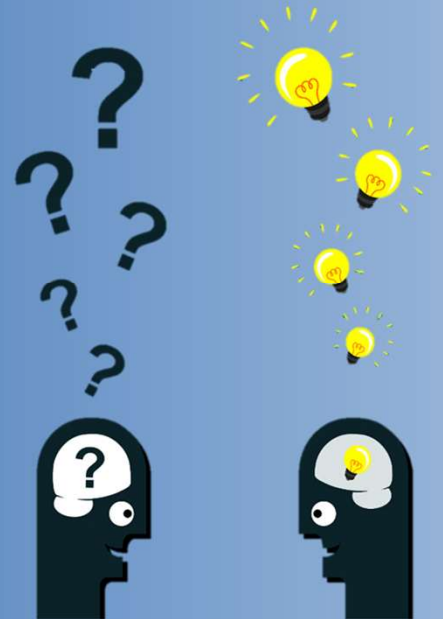
Imagining possibilities: Blue-sky thinking



Let's explore blue-sky thinking techniques and how it can be used in an appraisal setting.

Blue-Sky Thinking

- Appraiser wants change...
- What is important, relevant & meaningful to them?
- What would good look like?
- How would life look in 6 months' time?
- Encourage imaginative thinking



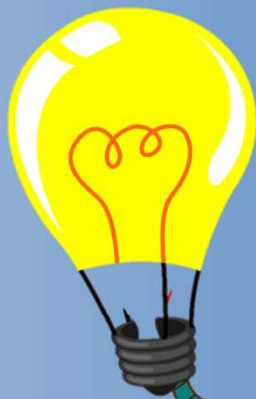
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So by this point, the appraiser has helped the appraisee talk through a particular issue, look at it from a few different angles, and tease out what really matters. This is where you can invite them to use their imagination — to picture what things would look like if everything around that issue was going well.

Now, because we all work in the very real world of modern healthcare, this can feel a bit uncomfortable at first. Blue-sky thinking doesn't always come easily. So encourage the appraisee to be imaginative and playful with it — to throw ideas out there without judging them. And if you hear them starting to say, "...but...", just gently remind them that for now, this is the *perfect* scenario they're describing.

It can really help to set a timeframe. You might suggest something like six months from now — everything's working well — and ask them to describe it. What are they doing? How are they feeling? What resources do they have? Who are they working with?

The aim isn't to land on a perfect answer. It's to generate lots of possibilities. Some ideas will be unrealistic, and some may never happen — and that's absolutely fine. Because somewhere in that mix, there's usually something practical and achievable that the appraisee can take forward.



Imagine...

...if situation was changed and was good?

- What are you doing?
- Fun, fast, lots of ideas
- Permission to dream
- Ideal future
- What, not how...
- **Could this be added to your PDP?**

Image 2516123 from pixabay.com

Here are a few tools you can use to help the appraisee picture what things might look like if the situation changed — and things were going well.

It's worth remembering that, as the appraiser, you're not there to solve the problem for them. And the appraisee doesn't need to come up with a full solution during the appraisal either. What this protected time *can* offer, though, is the chance to identify some first steps they might take.

Those steps don't have to be big — they might be as simple as picking up the phone to a colleague or manager or arranging to visit another unit. Used in this way, the technique is about empowering the appraisee — helping them feel more able to work on the issue, rather than feeling stuck or powerless.

You can invite them to describe what "good" looks like for them. What's changed? What's different? What's happening now? You might even say, "*Imagine you've got a limitless budget — what's going on?*" Who's there? What does the day look like? Encourage them to really use their imagination.

We're a diverse group and some people will find this easier than others. It's okay. It's still a worthwhile process and gently encouraging them to stay with it can be really helpful.

Once you've generated a list of ideas, you can then help them narrow things down. Ask questions like, "*Which of these feels most important?*" or "*Which one could you realistically take forward?*"

And once they've identified something meaningful to them, you can invite them to add it to their PDP.

Summary recap



Purpose of appraisal
and active listening



Opening out the
appraisal
conversation



Introduction to blue-
sky thinking

Images 5389, 5711 and 8274 from nhsscotlandphotolibrary.org

In summary, we have reviewed the purpose of appraisal, what it is and what it is not, and the importance of active listening.

We also looked at the techniques used to open up the appraisal conversation; and we have also had a look at the concept of blue-sky thinking and how it can be used in appraisal.

End of module pt1

What's in module pt2?



So that brings us to the end of this part of the module.

What's in module pt2?

- YouTube short videos on Active Listening
- Simulated examples of Practice Appraisal sessions
 - Opening up appraisal conversation
 - Blue-sky thinking
- Background and other resources (optional)

In part 2, you'll be asked to watch a few short YouTube videos on active listening. We've also included a simulated appraisal discussion, so you can see how the techniques we've talked about come together in practice and get a feel for what's expected of you on the day.

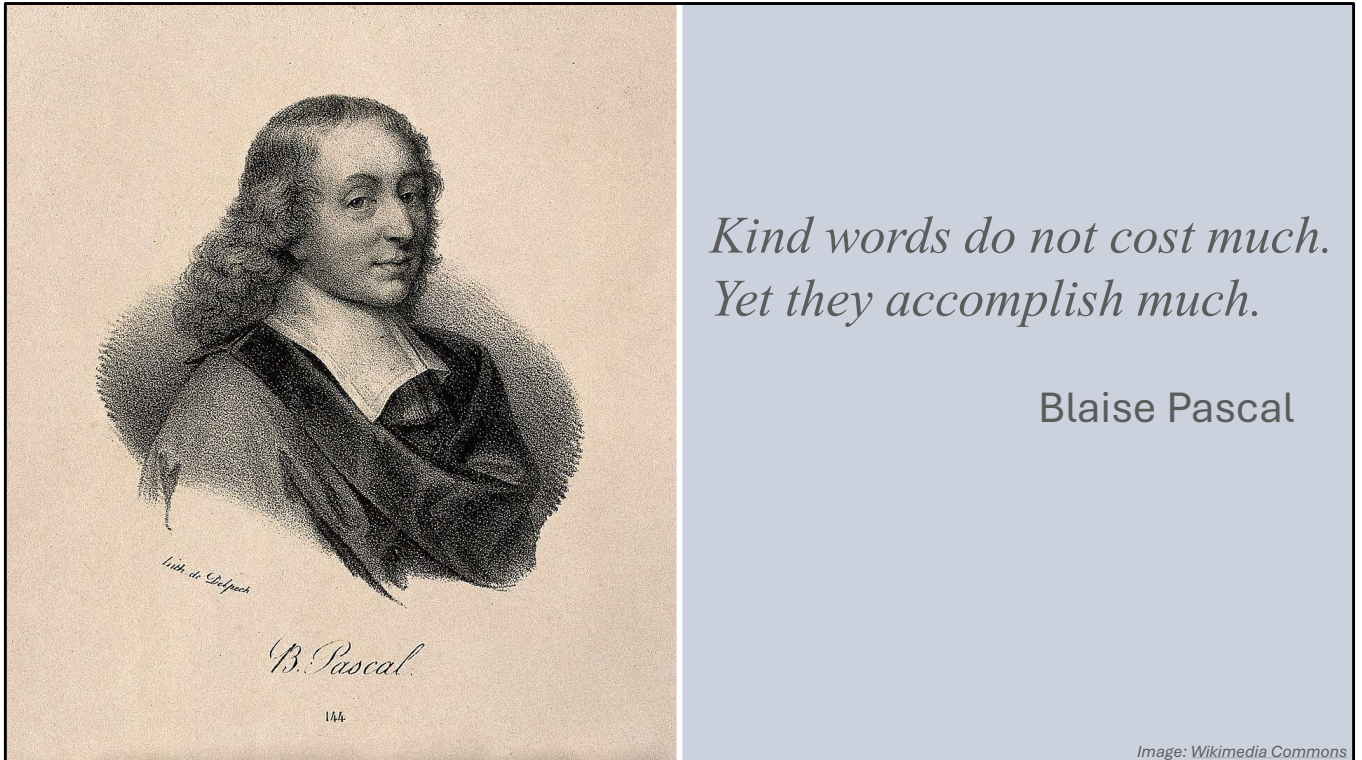
Before coming to the workshop, have a think about an appraisal situation you could bring to the mini practice sessions. You don't need to prepare any documents — you'll just talk it through on the day. The detail of the situation isn't important; the focus will be on the appraiser role.

We've also added some optional background resources and references you might find useful, including a link to our "*coaching skills in appraisal*" module from the New Appraiser programme.

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AM Time	Session	PM Time
09:00	Welcome and introductions	13:30
09:15	Dilemmas appraisees bring	13:45
09:25	Your experience (breakouts)	13:55
09:35	Practice skills #1 (Opening up the conversation)	14:25
10:50	BREAK	15:25
11:05	Practice skills #2 (Blue-sky thinking)	15:50
12:25	Plenary / Q&A	16:50
12:30	End	17:00

Here's a rough outline of how the day will run. There's quite a bit of interaction built in, so it's really important that you complete this module — and the recommended videos — before you come along.



Thank you for watching and we look forward to welcoming you to the workshop.

This resource may be made available, in full or summary form, in alternative formats and community languages. Please contact us on **0131 275 6000** or email altformats@nhs.scot to discuss how we can best meet your requirements.

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[End of IAC pre-course module]

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