
Podcasting About Mental Health: A Guide

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This guide was written by **Zoe Maggs**, Programme Officer for Men's Mental Health at Student Minds.

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Context

Well Lads was a three-year project on men's mental health in higher education run by Student Minds, the UK's student mental health charity, and supported by funding from Comic Relief between 2018 and 2021. The project's main aims were to encourage male students to look for help with their mental health when they need it, and to improve male students' understanding of mental health. The project took a co-production approach, where male student volunteers worked together to decide what different activities they could run at their universities. Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the volunteers chose to work remotely, focussing on podcasting and social media. Student Minds provided training and support to enable the volunteers to make informed choices about the shape their work would take.

This guide has been made from the volunteers' training and the learnings they have taken from running their own podcast on men's mental health: Changing MENTality.

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity

Our goal is to transform the state of student mental health so that all in higher education can thrive. We support students to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support their peers and create change. We also work collaboratively with institutions, students' unions and other organisations involved in higher education, supporting them to take a whole-university approach to mental health. In addition to providing well-resourced mental health services, a whole-university approach recognises that all aspects of university life should support and promote positive mental health and well-being.



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What is a podcast, and why use it to talk about mental health?

A podcast is very similar to radio, but you can listen to it whenever you want to, instead of needing to be available as it is broadcast. It is hosted on the internet, and is accessible across a range of apps and platforms. Podcasts can be more of an informal conversation, a chat with friends that listeners can tune into when and where they want, rather than an entertaining and structured show like we see with traditional radio. It can be quite easy to create a podcast from home, and it can be done remotely using very little hardware or software. Podcasts have become increasingly popular over the past few years, especially with young people (National Literacy Trust, 2020).

Podcasting can be a powerful tool for talking about mental health.

Hearing someone's voice as they tell their story can help bring the words to life, and can help listeners to know they are not alone, and listening to others share their stories also promotes talking about mental health:

"Listening helped me feel more comfortable being who I am in mens contact sports and really helped me come out of a dark period" (feedback on the Changing MENTality podcast)

It can also help you to personally share your experiences and be more open about your mental health:

"Speaking openly on episodes has helped me be more confident with talking about my own mental health with family and friends" (Well Lads Volunteer)

The ability to plan and edit the conversation means that those who feature can have the comfort of knowing that they will only share what they want to share about themselves, and the podcast producer can set their own 'messaging guidelines' to help guests understand how to talk about mental health in a safe way.

Podcasting can be easy!

With so much information available on how to podcast, it's easy to think that podcasting is a complicated and difficult thing to do. It doesn't have to be, as volunteers on the Well Lads project have found:

"I'd wanted to podcast for years before joining the Student Minds project. I'd looked through so many guides and tutorials, and there's so much information out there. I just ended up feeling like it wasn't something I could do without training or help from someone. Being on the Well Lads project has helped me see how accessible podcasting actually is. At a very basic level, you are just recording a video call, turning it into an audio file, deleting bits you don't like using free software from Audacity, and then uploading the new version to a podcast hosting site. It really is that simple." (Well Lads Volunteer)

What do I really need to get started?

There are lots of guides available online that will talk you through the practicalities of podcasting, including [this very comprehensive one](#) provided by Buzzsprout. Our guide is here to help you understand how to podcast about mental health in a safe and effective way, and to support you in knowing what to expect from the experience. Using the internet to find out how to set up a podcast can be overwhelming at first, because there are lots of things you could consider, if you wanted to create professional-level content. Much of the information won't be relevant to you when you are just starting out and want to give it a go at a basic level. To give you a sense of how basic the set-up stage can be, here is a general checklist of what the Well Lads volunteers considered when setting up the Changing MENTality podcast.

The Changing MENTality set-up

Hardware

Headset, or microphone and headphones

- Improves sound quality
- Can give more privacy to initial conversations during recording

Some of the volunteers on the Well Lads project just used their laptop's built-in microphones, and didn't use headphones. One thing to consider is the likelihood of guests having access to this kind of hardware - if it's unlikely, there is little reason for you to have it as the audio will sound mismatched in quality.

Laptop or similar device

- To run editing software
- To record a video or phone call
- To access the internet and upload the recording

Software

Zoom, or similar

- To host the conversation you will record

The Well Lads volunteers used Zoom, following the process described in [this guide's video](#), but you can use any video call platform that will allow you to record. You can even just use your phone and record a phone call conversation you have.

Freeconvert, or similar, to change video to audio (if needed)

- To convert video calls from an MP4 to an MP3, ready to be edited.

If using Zoom to record, you will get an audio (m4a.) file which can be directly uploaded to Audacity, and many other audio editing softwares without any need for conversion.

Audacity for Windows, or GarageBand for Mac

- To edit your MP3 file

Here is a video guide on [how to edit in Audacity](#), and [how to import audio](#) and [how to edit audio in GarageBand](#)

Online Accounts

Buzzsprout, or similar podcast host account

- This is how you will get your episode online

We used Buzzsprout on the Well Lads project because it is known for having an easy-to-use interface.

Spotify and Apple/iTunes

- You need to link your podcast to common podcast players. Apple is the biggest podcast player in the world, followed by Spotify.

This article tells you [how to link your podcast from Buzzsprout to Apple](#). The guide ends with a list of other guides showing you how to link your podcast to all of the main players.

Social Media, such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook

- Help people find your podcast
- Get feedback from your listeners

Building a listenership is something that takes time, and social media can be a really good tool for reaching as many listeners as possible.

Canva or a design account

- Create podcast cover art that helps listeners easily recognise your work
- Apple requires all podcasts to have artwork before being accepted onto their directory

Designing cover art for a podcast doesn't need to be complex. The volunteers on the Well Lads project designed their logo without any prior design experience, and [this guide](#) talks you through using Canva to create your logo.

I've got the kit - what's next?

Podcasting is not just about having the right tech, and the platforms. It's about building relationships with people, and creating meaningful content and stories that matter to listeners.

"For me, a lot of it's in the planning, and the ideas stage. You need to put time into deciding what your episode is going to be about, and what it won't cover too, to help keep the conversation on track" (Well Lads Volunteer)

"The most important stuff is actually your facilitation skills – you could have the crispest sounding podcast ever, but it won't matter if it's not interesting or the conversation is really stunted and unnatural, or what you're talking about is unsafe or triggering for listeners" (Well Lads Volunteer)

"During the planning stage, you need to remember to pace yourself, and think about your boundaries and what you can realistically commit yourself to for the episode. The best episodes are those that are well managed - when everyone has a good sense of what's expected of each other, and you make time for debriefing afterwards to think about how you can do it better next time." (Well Lads Volunteer)

Planning & managing production

(Co) produce your ideas with your team or guests

If you are working with someone or a group of people to run the podcast then it is really important that everyone involved feels safe, respected and listened to. Co-production is an approach that focuses on working with people, rather than doing things to or for them.

When co-producing a plan for the episode, it can be helpful to consider:

Format of the episode - will you research, prepare content and present this to the listener? Will you host an informal chat about lived experience? A mix of both?

Who talks - are you going to invite guest interviewees, or work with people you already know well?

Boundaries - what types of questions or experiences is everyone okay with talking about?

Delegating tasks - who is going to write a basic script or finalise the prompts, and who will be responsible for recording and editing? Who is going to listen to the episode to check it is okay to publish?

Keeping on top of tasks - how are you going to note down the decisions you've made about who is going to do what?



Case study: on the Well Lads project, podcasters used a virtual workspace called Slack to stay in touch with each other and discuss their initial ideas. They also used a shared Google Drive where they stored their notes from meetings they ran when planning their episodes, and a spreadsheet to keep track of episodes, recording their 'stage' of production (idea, plan, record, edit, reviewing, published.) You can also use platforms such as Trello for keeping track of your work.

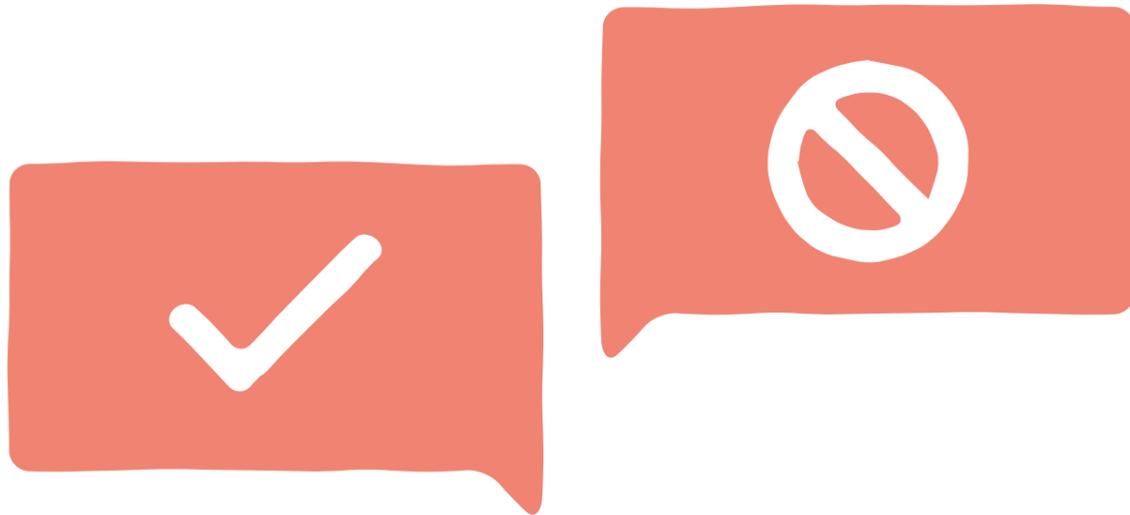
Create prompts, scripts, or wing it on the day. Whatever works for you.

You don't need to create a script for an episode. How much detail you want to have ready in advance of recording depends on what you and your speakers feel comfortable with. However if you decide not to use a script, researching a speaker or a topic is generally helpful so you have an understanding. It can be helpful to mindmap all of the smaller ideas that you might want to cover during the conversation, so that you can have a general idea of who will speak about what, when, and for how long. You may find that prompts are more useful than a detailed script. After a few times of doing this process, you'll find a way that works best for you.

While planning can give everyone some comfort and an idea of what will happen, it's also important to remember that it's okay if the conversation goes off topic - sometimes these moments can create the most meaningful discussions.

"Instead of having a list of questions, have an opening question, and a list of stuff you want to find out. This can help interviews sound more natural and give flexibility for them to go elsewhere in terms of topics if needed." (Well Lads Volunteer)

One thing that is very important at this stage is to make sure that you understand if there is anything that your speakers don't want to talk about - more on this in ['applying boundaries'](#).



Set SMART goals

Co-producing ideas with the people who are going to be involved in an episode can be really empowering for everyone involved, and it's important that at the end of a collaborative session, everyone leaves with a sense of next steps, to take you closer to producing the episode. SMART goals can help you to make sure that everyone is committing to genuinely achievable next steps, whilst considering wider commitments that often come with student life, such as assessment deadlines and extra-curricular activities.

Specific: Define exactly how a task is going to be carried out and be as clear as possible.

"I am going to create a shareable, editable Google Document for me and my friends to use to record our ideas for a podcast episode"

Measurable: How will you or your team know when it is done?

"I will share the document with my friends, and tell them how to add their ideas"

Action-oriented: Is your goal to do something? Ask yourself this question. If your task is not an action, it is probably still an idea. Make sure you define what is going to be done. In this example, the action is to create a document.

Realistic: Check that the timeframe for this goal is realistic, considering other commitments that may need to be met too. If the goal is not achievable, make it smaller, or consider giving the task to someone else, and taking on one that is more realistic for your circumstances.

Time-defined: Include a timeframe for when this task is going to be done.

Example of a SMART goal:

"I am going to create a shareable, editable Google Document for me and my friends to use to record our ideas for a podcast episode. I will share the document with my friends by the end of this month, and tell them how to add their ideas."

Before setting SMART goals, it can be helpful to ask everyone to get their schedules out in front of them, so that you can all let each other know if there is anything coming up that you need to prioritise. This is a great way of protecting your wellbeing and avoiding burnout - remember to schedule in time for self-care and relaxation, as well as thinking about how you will get your podcast episode created.

This section of the guide has covered the basics of planning. Volunteers on the project also used a checklist to check every episode against before publication - you may find it helpful to follow something similar.

Facilitation skills

Use active listening

In some of your podcast episodes your guest speakers may want to open up about their own experiences of mental health difficulties. This is really positive and is to be encouraged, as it can reduce stigma around mental health.

Active Listening

We can use active listening to avoid trying to fix other people's problems, and to support them to think through what they need for themselves. "Active listening" is a series of techniques that can be used to show someone that you really understand and hear what they are saying. Without actively listening, it can be common for people to try to help each other by offering solutions to fix their problems.

It can be helpful to recognise how we fall into "fixer mode" without realising:

Draw Toast



People don't always hear what we mean to say, and similarly, what we think we hear is not always the same as what someone else wants us to hear.

Fixer vs Supporter

When talking to people about their experiences with mental health, it is important to be a supporter, not a fixer. This means using active listening to ensure that you empower others to build their own confidence and autonomy, instead of trying to give them solutions that may not work for them.



Here are some 'fixer' behaviours to look out for:

- Telling someone they have a problem
- Arguing for the benefits of change
- Telling someone how to change
- Warning someone of the consequences of not

'OARS'

We can use an acronym called 'OARS' to keep us in active listening mode. This stands for ...



Open questions

These are questions that don't give a yes or no answer. It can be helpful to begin conversations or new topics this way because it will encourage a person to open up in their answer.

In the podcast episode 'Who Are Our Role Models?', Ben says

"Opening that up to the group. Who do we look up to?"

This is a broad question that can invite a range of answers. If, instead, he asked a closed question like

"Do you have any role models?"

responses could be yes or no.

Affirmations

Statements which recognise a person's strengths. If someone speaks about a situation that sounds very challenging, you can use affirmations to build their confidence.

In 'What Next?' A Conversation on Graduation, podcaster Sam reflects on how he felt when he was looking for graduate jobs, asking

"What if I'm just not good enough?"

"I'm glad you brought this feeling up"

replies Kevin, which affirms for Sam that it is a good thing that he has shared his feelings. This encouragement can let Sam know that going into more detail is welcomed and that Kevin is ready to listen.

Rephrasing

Restating and clarifying what the other person has said to better understand their point of view. Reflective listening involves using phrases such as "it sounds as if", "what I'm hearing is", "it's almost as if", "it seems like".

In International Study, Culture Shocks and Mental Health, George uses rephrasing when he sums up what Krai has said:

"It sounds like Leeds offers quite a lot for international students"

This offers Krai the chance to let George know if he has misunderstood.

Summarising

This involves listing the key points of your conversation. Let the person correct or add anything you may have missed. This shows them that you've been listening and that they are understood.

In the episode mentioned above, George adds:

"So we've spoken about food and also about what it's like making friends."

This offers Krai a space to let George know if he thought they had been talking about something else, and there is something he wants to clarify.

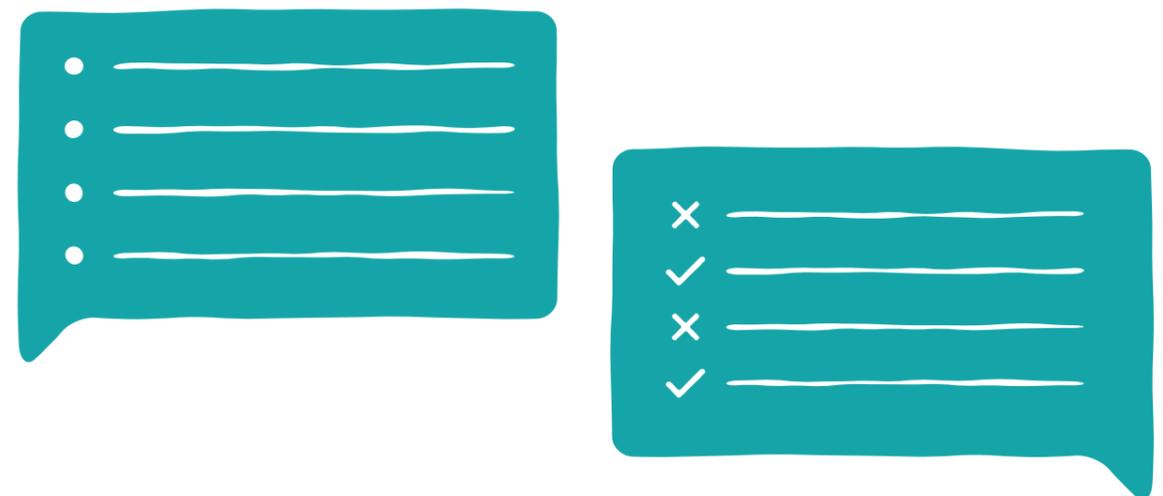
Applying boundaries

Boundaries are a way of keeping you and your listeners safe and comfortable. There are a number of ways that you can assert your boundaries when podcasting.

Developing messaging guidelines

Well Lads project volunteers co-produced a set of 'messaging guidelines' which they asked guests to stick to in order to keep the conversations safe for listeners. Messaging guidelines are a series of preferences when it comes to language. There may be some guidelines that you want to keep as 'rules' which you feel must not be broken, while others can be flexible to the needs of listeners and may change over time. They are there to help make sure that the conversations you publish are respectful and take a pro-recovery approach when it comes to mental health.

Messaging guidelines can be seen as one practical tool for setting boundaries when making media content, because you have a written resource which helps to give you and your guests a very clear understanding of acceptable and appropriate language and tone for the conversations you will have. For an example of messaging guidelines, you can see the ones that our blogging team uses [here](#).



Being clear about your role

Being clear about your role as a podcast host is another way of setting boundaries with guests and with listeners. It's important to note that you are not an expert in all things mental health. This can help you stay away from giving advice or trying to help the person you are talking to without the relevant training that you need to do this. It can also help you to protect your own wellbeing by only offering the amount of support you can give.

In this context, boundaries can be seen as a fence, not a wall. You can listen to someone's concerns, and you can give them a space to feel comfortable to talk, but when you need to, you can take a step back without them entering your space.

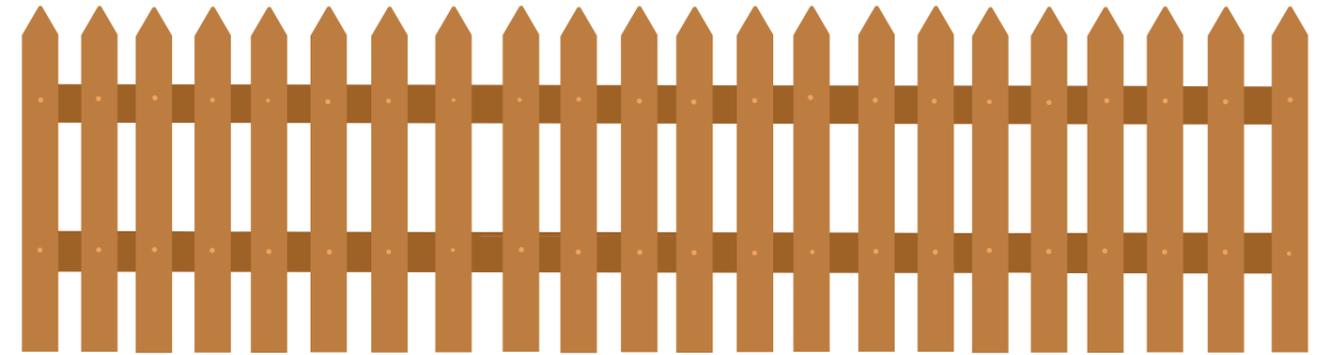


Boundaries work best when you put them in place early, and clearly:

For example, in many Changing MENTality podcast episodes, volunteers introduce themselves to the listeners and their guest speakers at the start of a recording by telling them that they are not medically trained professionals, and they won't be giving advice. They will share experiences and stories of their own and from other students in terms of mental health, to reduce stigma and help others understand their own experiences better.

Consider your guest speaker's boundaries

When producing a podcast episode, co-creating a basic script or series of prompts with your guest can be one opportunity for setting boundaries. During this stage, you can agree with the guest in terms of what topics you both want to talk about. Make sure you ask your speaker if there are particular experiences they don't want to talk about, or questions they don't want to answer, and remember to protect your own boundaries too, by telling them if there is anything you don't want to talk about.



Coping with your boundaries being tested

There may be times when you need to assert boundaries within recording sessions. For example, if a guest speaker begins to talk on a topic that you have told them you personally don't want to cover. Many people don't like confrontation with others. When podcasting, it can be tempting to allow breaks in your boundaries within the recording session, with a view to editing chunks of audio out afterwards. In these situations, it can be helpful to focus on the potential benefits of asserting your boundaries. Here are some benefits that the Well Lads volunteers reflected on in training:

- It can be helpful for your listeners if they can hear you modelling the use of boundaries, as this may be something that they themselves are lacking in their own lives.
- You can develop your assertiveness and confidence as a person by reflecting on what the process was like for you.
- The speaker is more likely to understand and react positively to your editing choices if you mention them at the time. For example "I need to remind you of the messaging guidelines. We prefer not to use that phrase. I'll need to edit that out."
- Can help it feel like a real conversation.

Considering boundaries when talking about challenging topics

Some topics that you and your guest speakers may want to talk about on your podcast could be challenging to listen to. For example, some topics that could come up include abuse, self-harm or addiction. Boundaries are really important when creating episodes on these kinds of topics for everyone, including yourself, your speakers, and your listeners.

Many people do not seek help when they are affected by these issues due to the stigma that is attached to them. Talking about these issues may encourage individuals to seek help and reduce taboo. You need to think about how to cover these topics in a balanced and informed way, whilst thinking about the safety and comfort of your listeners, your speaker and yourself.

Here are some top tips:

‘Trigger warnings and signposting’ let listeners know if a difficult topic is going to be mentioned, and where they can get help for these experiences. It is best to give trigger warnings at the very beginning of an episode, so that listeners can decide to put strategies in place for their own safety if they need to (e.g. choosing to listen in a comfortable space rather than on public transport)

You don’t have to use the term trigger warning if this doesn’t feel natural for your way of speaking. You can simply tell listeners what the episode is going to be about, as Caleb does in *Depression at University*:

“This episode deals with subjects like depression, alcoholism, and suicide. Links can be found in the description below to relevant services, if any of these subjects are distressing to you”.

It can be hard to anticipate what topics could be triggering for listeners, so it is a good idea to get into the habit of telling listeners what every episode is going to be about, in case they want to move themselves to a more comfortable space to listen from, or choose not to listen to that episode.

Doing some **research** using reputable sources such as government-led bodies or major charities can help to give context.

Highlighting messaging guidelines for the speaker in advance if you want them to take care with their language on a particular point they intend to make.

Plan in extra time at the recording stage in case the speaker needs breaks.

Schedule some **self-care activities** to look forward to after the recording session.

Reach out to your support networks to talk to them about your experience of recording the episode to reduce the emotional burden on yourself. This is often known as ‘debriefing’.

If you are working as part of a podcasting team, consider asking **someone else to record this episode, or edit the audio file** if it will be challenging to be part of the conversation.

Definitions help frame conversation and reduce misconceptions.



Example: in *Social Class and University*, George gives a definition of social class to make sure that listeners understand that while experiencing a low-income may be part of someone’s class, there are other social and cultural factors that can feed into this identity too.

Advice from the Changing MENTality team:

“There’s **no point** having all these fancy platforms set up **before you even find out if you enjoy making episodes**, so don’t be afraid to just **give it a go on a really small scale** at first. Just tell yourself that no-one has to hear the first few trial-runs you do.”

“You won’t like listening to your own voice at first. I don’t think anyone does. Just **keep practicing** and it will become more normal to you eventually.”

“**Don’t get too hung up** on the worst **interpretation someone could have of your words** - most people will get that it’s coming from a good place (and complex things can be hard to express and people understand that).”

“**Being honest** when working in a team is really important, and trying to do this as early as possible if you think you have over-committed to something.”

“**You don’t need studio space!** Podcasts can be made remotely and still be of the same quality as those recorded in a live studio environment.”

“I think the main thing to keep in mind during the set up stage is that it’s really important to **get others to review your ideas** for the thing that matter – the overall concept of your podcast, what it is that it’s trying to achieve, what its core message or topic is going to be, really needs to come through in the title and in the artwork, and it’s easy to get tunnel vision and think these things are clear to everyone else. **Getting a fresh pair of eyes on your overall concept is so important** as it’s quite difficult to change at a later date without re-creating your account from scratch.”

“It’s really not about the practical stuff, like editing. That stuff’s actually easy. It’s the planning and making sure you get the quality of conversation you want that’s difficult. **Practice using OARS in normal conversations with friends.** Let your practice of active listening spill into your everyday life. You don’t have to reserve it for awkwardly recording yourself with a stranger in your room. You’ll become much more skilled if you build it into all of your conversations.”

“**Don’t get too stuck in trying to make an episode perfect.** Listeners care more about the content of a podcast than they do about audio quality.”

“**No idea is a bad idea**, you shouldn’t abandon an idea for an episode based on your own view of it. It might be a **matter of tweaking** or modifying the idea.”

“**Try not to focus on numbers.** The amount of listeners/downloads does not matter. It only takes one person to take something away from the episode to make it worth it.”

“You can get off to a **rocky start with a guest** but still **resolve it** and end up with a good episode.”

“Make sure you **ask for feedback.** If you don’t get feedback, you can’t learn. Make an online mind map available to your listeners. Ask people you interview if they can give feedback on how you handled their involvement. It’s all good learning.”

“If you can, **get someone else to edit** an episode if you have been the main person involved in planning and recording it. This can help with avoiding being a perfectionist. They won’t notice all the little ums and ahs, silences and tiny noises like you might.”

References

National Literacy Trust (2020) Children and young people's engagement with podcasts before and during lockdown. Accessed at: https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Children_and_young_peoples_engagement_with_podcasts_before_and_during_lockdown_TGY0i4G.pdf

Designed by Oscar Lane Design

Illustrated by Lizzie Knott



Lizzie Knott