



# SAGE & THYME: Communication Skills

SAGE & THYME: Sgiliau Cyfathrebu



**Academi Oncoleg Felindre**  
**Velindre Oncology Academy**

✓ Gwasanaeth Canser Felindre / Velindre Cancer Service

## Course Overview

The SAGE & THYME Foundation Level face-to-face workshop teaches the communication skills needed to notice distress, listen carefully and respond helpfully, using a structured approach (SAGE & THYME). The skills taught can be used by everyone (staff, students, volunteers and others) – at any level and in any area and organisation (including at home) when speaking to patients, carers, relatives, clients, customers, colleagues, friends, family, children and indeed anyone who has emotional concerns.

Sage and Thyme is a mnemonic, which is a pattern of letters that assist in remembering something.



**3 Hours**

Letter	Word	Summary
S	Setting	When you notice upset/worry, think first about the setting
A	Ask	Ask specifically about the worries (if they wish to speak with you)
G	Gather	Gather all the concerns/worries without attempting to 'fix' any of them
E	Empathy	Say something empathic such as "You have a lot to be worrying about at the moment"
T	Talk	Ask about their support network – who do they talk to?
H	Help	Ask how their supportive people help them
Y	You	Your ideas about what might help with the worries and concerns
M	Me	Anything you would like me to do – then my ideas if welcomed
E	End	Summary of the concerns/worries/plans and a closing sentence "Can we leave it there for now?"

The structure shapes the questions and interactions. It guides the conversation with the worried person:

- Notice when people are worried or upset
- Respond in a controlled and organised way
- Use the structure to guide the conversation from their worries to their support
- Be supportive without having to fix their problems.

**THEIR  
CONCERNS**

**THEIR  
SUPPORT**

**THEIR  
PLANS**

## Why complete the course?

The skills taught in the SAGE & THYME workshop are universally applicable and helpful. For this reason, we refer to them as 'foundation level' skills. The SAGE & THYME structure can be used in many conversations involving emotions, worries or upset.

### The SAGE & THYME structure can be used in situations such as

I'm being misunderstood

Will I lose my mind?

I worry about my family - it's too much

The finances feel like a mess

Will my partner still want to be with me?

I feel out of control of my whole situation

I feel tired and low and scared

What have I done to deserve this?

I can't face more of this

I don't feel very brave

I feel as though I am letting everyone down

I feel that I am losing my independence

### Complex situations when the SAGE & THYME structure does not apply

Diagnosing an anxiety state

Working with denial

Breaking bad news

Assessing suicidal risk

Requests for euthanasia

Challenging undesirable behaviour in a colleague

Diagnosing depression

Handling irreversible loss

The withdrawn patient

Discussing resuscitation or the limits of treatment

## Why can using the SAGE & THYME structure in a conversation help staff?

When we asked a number of staff in a lung cancer directorate how they feel when they are in contact with a patient/relative who gets upset, they said they felt:

Upset	Empathetic
Helpless	Sad
Stressed	Emotional
Worried	Sympathy
Awkward	Concerned
Anxious	Frustrated

Without guidance and training, staff tend to give too much advice too quickly and ignore the emotions of patients because they are unsure how to respond to emotional distress. After staff have been trained in just three hours, they say that:

- Instead of avoiding such conversations, they feel confident in speaking to people with worries.
- Instead of trying to fix problems, they have learned to hold back on advice and let the person think and speak.
- Instead of feeling helpless, they feel satisfied and in control of these conversations (improves their wellbeing).
- As well as being kind and empathic, they can use evidence-based listening skills.
- As well as being caring and well-meaning, they can empower people to find their own solutions to their worries.

Each element of the SAGE & THYME structure is based on published research on communication skills. For example, we can't guess what other people are thinking – we have to ask them. We should also listen to all their concerns and hold back on our own ideas on what might help. The evidence is discussed in the SAGE & THYME workshop.

SAGE & THYME training increases knowledge of helpful communication skills and also affects how people behave when speaking to a patient.

People say that they use the skills taught in practice and that they make a difference both to the worried person they are speaking to and also themselves.

There have been a number of peer-reviewed papers published by the SAGE & THYME Team (in collaboration with the Maguire Communication Skills Unit), the University of Manchester and others.

Find out about SAGE & THYME research and evaluation.

When organisations teach their staff, students and volunteers the SAGE & THYME workshop, they find that:

- It is useful for newly qualified staff and students
- It can be used to support colleagues as a part of the staff well-being programme
- It is helpful for volunteers
- It supports the organisational values
- It helps with complying with 'duty of candour'
- It provides evidence of a proactive approach to complaints for CQC
- It supports staff well-being as feel more in control and satisfied with conversations
- It follows evidence-based practice

### Who should complete this course?

This course is suitable for nurses, radiographers, managers, ward clerks, porters, students, allied health professionals, doctors, secretaries, receptionists, researchers and volunteers. The SAGE & THYME Foundation Level workshop is suitable for anyone, at any level, whether they are clinical or not, and not just those who deal with patients.

The training has also been attended by Local authority staff, teachers, chaplains, ambulance staff, social care workers, mental health workers, school children and police officers.

Many organisations currently teach SAGE & THYME to their staff – including the Velindre Cancer Centre where it forms part of staff induction.

Other organisations teach whole directorates (e.g. lung cancer or renal staff – from administrators to doctors) because they see the universal importance of effective communication skills.

## Course Delivery Method

The SAGE & THYME foundation level workshop is taught up to 30 participants in 3 hours by three trained SAGE & THYME facilitators, using group work, a presentation and conversation rehearsals. This course is delivered in person.

### Why learning happens

Learning styles	Impact on learners
Mixture of presentations, discussions, rehearsals and films	Includes and keeps their attention
The evidence for effective communication is described	They feel motivated to change their behaviour
'Rehearsals' where the structure is demonstrated live	They see how a situation suggested by them actually plays out
Small group discussions	Learners talk and share their learning
Short film of SAGE & THYME being used	They notice the efficiency and completeness of using a structure

## Course Duration

This course is delivered over a half day (3 hours).

## Key Topics Covered in the Course

- Recognising psychological distress
- Benefits of effective communication
- Evidence behind effective communication skills
- Listening and responding skills
- Using the SAGE & THYME structure in a conversation
- Supporting the person without having to solve their concerns
- When SAGE & THYME is not the right tool to use

## CPD

This course will contribute towards your CPD hours/points.

## Cost

This course is currently only available to staff employed within the Velindre Cancer Centre. We are working on obtaining the license to allow us to deliver this course externally and we should have this in place soon in 2025. Register your interest and submit your queries [here](#).

## Register

See upcoming dates and book your place(s) via our [Training Calendar](#)

## Have a question?

Submit a [contact request](#) or call us on 029 2019 6868.