

What Can I Do?

HOW TO LISTEN



***"Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening
when you'd have preferred to talk."***

-Doug Larson,
United Press International

In the last chapter, I discussed some general techniques for talking with someone who has faced a loss -words you can use, phrases you can express, and thoughts you can communicate to ease their pain. But often, saying absolutely nothing-just being there to listen-is the single most important thing you can do to help. Most of us yearn to share our feelings and thoughts with someone who will really listen, and yet we are often disappointed. When someone is troubled and experiencing difficult and challenging times, they want someone to understand and appreciate what they are going through. Their needs are really quite simple; they are just looking for comfort.

When we listen, we give the speaker something quite special-a gift of our time and attention. Listening allows the speaker to vent feelings and emotions. By giving a voice to their problems and difficulties, the speaker can sort through issues, challenges, and alternatives, often discovering answers and potential solutions by themselves.

Difficult experiences can leave us feeling lonely and isolated. An effective listener can ease someone's suffering and promote healing. The best listeners are sympathetic or have prior experience with similar grief. They have the unique ability to put themselves into someone else's shoes and experience so they appear to know how that person truly feels. An empathetic listener is the first aid someone needs while dealing with a difficult and challenging situation.

How Do I Listen?

Listening is neither innate nor automatic. It is both a skill and a discipline, and it must be learned. Like any skill or discipline, it takes practice and self-control to become proficient.

Although listening is the most frequently used form of communication, you won't find it taught like reading, writing, and speaking. Listening is the primary key to effective communications, but you'll need to be self-motivated to develop your own techniques to acquire, practice, and master this skill.

Many people think that "hearing" is the same thing as "listening," but it's not. Hearing is the physical part of listening, when your ears first sense sound waves. After we hear, we interpret what is being said. Next, we evaluate the information, and finally, we react to what has been said. This interaction is essential to listening. Good listeners foster the silence necessary to encourage speech.

It is easy to find talkers-everyone seems to have something to share and wants to be heard. But if we are continually talking, we can't possibly be listening. And when we do take the time to listen, most folks act like it is something for them to do while waiting their turn to speak.

When someone thinks enough of you to share their burden, they are seeking an outlet to articulate their feelings and troubles. This is referred to as cathartic communication. You are being asked to listen and nothing more; no one expects you to have the answers, and no one wants you to judge.

Your job as a listener is quite simple: You are to listen and allow the speaker to feel, whether it is anger, pain, or fear. It is not your job to teach, to influence, to direct, or to correct; it doesn't matter how you think or feel. What is important is to allow the speaker to vent. Whatever emotions the speaker experiences are normal. Emotional release is a good thing and vitally important in the mourning and healing process.

Listening is not a passive activity; it takes energy, and it is hard work.



There are a number of things you can do to show that you're an active, engaging listener.

WHAT TO SAY AND DO

- Choose a setting that is quiet; one that is comfortable and private is even better.
- Look directly at the speaker.
- Tilt your face toward the speaker.
- Lean toward the speaker.
- Use body language.
- Mirror the body language of the speaker.
- Make eye contact.
- Employ facial expressions.
- Restate words and messages when appropriate.
- Open your posture.
- Be calm.
- Be patient.
- Demonstrate warmth.
- Disregard your own needs, and concentrate on the speaker.
- Allow the speaker to experience their feelings rather than you anticipating or guessing what they are feeling and putting words in their mouth.
- Train your eyes to look for nonverbal signals.
- Send out your own nonverbal signals, such as nodding your head that indicate you are actively listening.
- Stop talking.
- Avoid interruptions.
- Open your mind to concentrate so you can hear what the speaker is conveying.
- Allow the person to talk as much as they need to, even if they ramble and don't make sense. It is the telling and

retelling that will enable them to discover for themselves what is going on in their life and the meaning of those experiences.

- Change the way you are sitting if you feel yourself begin to slip away during the conversation.
- Encourage the person to talk more by asking open-ended questions, one at a time.
- If you are reaching out to them by telephone, make sure you have enough time to listen before placing the call.
- Graciously accept their appreciation by telling them it makes you feel good to be able to help in some way.
- If the person cries or has no words, just listen. Assure them that they should take all the time they need before continuing the conversation.

Ending an emotional conversation can be awkward. Wait until there is a real lull in the conversation and say, "I'm really glad we had this chance to be together. Is it okay if I visit you again soon? (or call you again soon?)"

HOW TO SAY IT

- I can see that you feel strongly about that.
- I can understand how you can see it like that.
- I can understand how you might feel that way.
- I can't be in your shoes, but I can be by your side and listen.
- I can't say I've been there, but I've been in the neighborhood.
- I see.
- I understand.
- If you want to talk, I'm here for you no matter how you need me.
- Thank you for trusting me enough to share your feelings.
- Would you like to talk about it?



WHAT NOT TO SAY AND DO

- Don't assume that you know what the speaker thinks or feels.
- Don't multitask-save the knitting or mail-sorting for later.
- Don't look away from the speaker.
- Avoid crossing your arms or legs.
- Don't roll your eyes.
- Avoid tapping your fingers, cracking your knuckles, or cleaning your fingernails.
- Don't interrupt.
- Don't take it personally if anger is expressed.
- Don't abandon someone because they are angry and need to vent their emotions.
- Don't yawn or nod off.
- Don't shake your head.
- Don't rush the speaker.
- Don't get ahead of the speaker and finish their thoughts.
- Don't ask questions about the details; allow them to express and share that information with you if or when they are ready.
- Don't cut them off before they have finished expressing themselves.
- Don't tell your own stories; this is; not about you.
- Don't tell stories about people you know or things you have read or heard about; their story is unique and all their own.
- Don't change the subject when the speaker takes a pause.
- Don't judge them for what they have expressed.
- Don't tell them what to think or feel.
- Don't try to solve their problems.
- Don't offer advice.

HOW NOT TO SAY IT

- I know just how you feel.
- If you think that's bad, wait until you hear. . .
- I'm sorry you feel that way.
- My sister (mother, father, brother, cousin, neighbor) had the same thing happen.
- So what are you going to do about it?
- That reminds me of. . .
- That's nothing, let me tell you about . . .
- You should be happy; things could be a lot worse.
- You shouldn't feel like that.

For further information:

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