

Muse

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How to be a good listener

By Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

A wise old owl lived in an oak,
The more he saw the less he spoke,
The less he spoke the more he heard.
Why can't we all be like that wise old
bird?

- Old nursery rhyme

Empathy is an art form rather than a science. The artful listener knows how to read between the lines, hear what others are feeling at heart and knows how to be fully present in mind, body and soul. The skilled listener knows how to put their own ego aside for the moment and be fully sensitive to the other person's feelings. Empathy is the imaginative projection into another's feelings and identifying with their situation, condition, and thoughts.

Empathy is neither agreeing nor disagreeing - it is listening and valuing another person's experience.

Some individuals struggle with empathy in part because they have never experienced receiving it - it is hard to give away what we, ourselves, haven't received. Others struggle due to their lack of attunement to their own feelings. If we can't or don't recognize our own feelings it is difficult to recognize others'.

What empathy isn't:

(Much of this is found in Non-Violent Communication by Marshall B. Rosenberg)

Advising/Offering solutions/Fixing/ Problem Solving: "I think you should..."; "How come you didn't...?"; Believing we have to fix things and make others feel better prevents us from being present for them.

One-upping: "That's nothing; wait'll you hear what happened to me." Perhaps it

can be comforting to hear how others have shared a similar experience but it is not listening to their experience.

Educating: "This could turn into a very positive experience for you if you just..." Intellectual understanding blocks empathy. When we are thinking about people's words and trying to connect them to our theories we are not with them.

Consoling: "It wasn't your fault; you did the best you could." Here we're trying to stop or relieve the person from the feelings they're having, rather than supporting that they feel as they do.

Story telling: "That reminds me of the time..." "I remember one time my friend didn't call me back for a week!" Maybe there are morals to be found in stories; it's still not empathy.

Shutting down: "Cheer up. Don't feel so bad."; "Yes but, the silver lining is..."; "Yes, but it's okay now"; "I'm home now so it's not a problem!" Such statements can be very minimizing to the individual's feelings. Often times, the up-beat perspective is offered not so much to be helpful but to relieve the speaker and/or the listener of the burden of suffering. There are times when we have forgotten the balanced perspective and we do need to be reminded but not before empathy is given.

Sympathizing: "Oh, you poor thing..." Sympathy is where we feel pity for the person - but it's not being present for them and their feelings.

Interrogating: "When did this begin?" Asking questions is not listening or reflecting.

Blaming/Explaining/Defending: "I would have called but..."; "You didn't say you wanted me to call." When

confronted with another person's anger or disappointment with our behaviour it's natural to want to defend ourselves but as soon as we start defending or explaining, we're not listening. Listen and reflect back the feelings you're hearing before explaining. For example, "You're mad because I didn't call."

Correcting: "That's not how it happened." Respect the fact that everyone, you included, has a different perspective of events. This is natural - expect and value it.

Apologizing: "I'm sorry"; "I said I was sorry!" Apologizing is not acknowledging your understanding of the other's feelings. Apologizing angrily is more offensive than contrite and is generally intended to shut the other person down.

Avoidance: Not answering; stonewalling; walking away and silence are not empathetic. Stay present physically and verbally acknowledge what the other is saying.

How to empathize:

When empathizing, no matter what words people use to express themselves, even when they are expressing displeasure towards you, listen for their **observations, feelings, needs and what they are requesting** rather than what they're thinking. Empathy helps prevent us from taking things personally. Listen to what people *need* rather than what they are thinking about you. People express themselves to fulfill a need. Reflect back the need: "You're angry because I didn't call. You worried needlessly and would have felt relieved or been able to make plans had I just called."



One format for empathizing is:

“Do you feel x (feeling word) because you need y (guess the need).....?”

For example, “Do you feel angry I didn’t call because you needed to plan your evening?”



Paraphrasing

Paraphrase to confirm whether you have received the other person’s message accurately. If you haven’t, this offers them the opportunity to clarify their message.

Paraphrasing can take the form of a question and can focus on:

- **What others are observing:** “Are you reacting to how many evenings I was gone last week?”
- **How others are feeling and the needs generating their feelings:** “Are you feeling hurt because you would have liked more appreciation of your efforts than you received?”
- **What others are requesting:** “Are you wanting me to tell you my reasons for saying what I did?”

Notice the difference between the above questions and the following:

- “What did I do that you are referring to?”
- “How are you feeling?” “Why are you feeling that way?”
- “What are you wanting me to do about it?”

The second set of questions asks for information without sensing the speaker’s feelings, needs or request. These types of questions can only serve to have people feel like they are being examined rather than heard.

If we do ask for information, it’s important to first express our own feelings and needs. We can try, “I am frustrated because I’d like to be clearer

about what you are referring to. Would you be willing to tell me what I’ve done that leads you to see me in this way?” It’s also far more effective to use this method than to simply say, “Yes, I understand.”

There are no hard and fast rules about when to paraphrase but whenever someone is expressing strong feelings, it’s safe to say that they would appreciate our reflecting back what they had to say. The point is to articulate and share your understanding. In silence or any other words, we are not showing our understanding. Even a simple acknowledgement is better than none at all.

Listen with your heart and put aside your ego. Consider the possibility that it is difficult for the speaker to share their feelings - perhaps they don’t feel safe or they don’t want to burden. Perhaps they fear your reaction. Perhaps they feel vulnerable. Perhaps they don’t value what they’re saying. Perhaps they feel hesitant, fragile, or unsure. Be a soft place for them to turn to.

“Don’t just do something, stand there.”

- Buddhist saying:

Notice how the person who gets louder does so because they feel unheard. (Those who yell often feel this.) Sometimes when we do show empathy, we provide a safe outlet for the person and it’s as if we opened the floodgates - this is good. Listen. Simply be present to their outpouring.

Maintain soft eye contact with the individual - neither staring nor looking away. Your body should be mostly facing the speaker. You should be within five feet of the person. The farther away, the less present you are. Watch your arms and legs - try not to cross them or have hands on your hips. Keep your voice calm and genuine. Be honest about how you are feeling. Being disingenuous is a disconnect. Try to have a facial expression that suggests openness. Don’t roll your eyes, sigh, fidget, look at your watch, watch TV, check your cell phone (or electronic organizer), take phone calls, interrupt, point out unrelated activities around you or read something.

Remember, the objective of empathy is to be more mirror-like, you suffering right along isn’t necessary. In empathy we simply bear the experience as we might help someone carry a heavy box.

It can be challenging and frustrating particularly for the beginner but keep trying. Even if your guesses at what the person is saying is wrong, often the fact that you keep hanging in there trying to understand will not be lost. This is a skill to be mastered with time and practice.

Should you find yourself on the receiving end of empathy, once all is said and done, recognize and appreciate their efforts. Remember to positively reinforce behaviour you want to see repeated.

In relating to others, empathy is easier when we don’t have preconceived ideas or judgments. Listen as you would read a book: read each sentence and envision the message and then turn the page without knowing what’s next.

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