

Some Thoughts on Listening

“It is impossible to overemphasise the immense needs humans have to be listened to. Listen to all the conversations of our world, between nations as well as those between people. They are, for the most part, dialogues of the deaf.”

Paul Tournier, *To Understand Each Other*, 1967, p. 8

Listening well is very difficult!

1. One of our greatest barriers is that we think we already do it well enough, that it's NOT difficult, and therefore we don't need to work at it.
2. Apart from the hearing impaired, anyone can **hear**, yet even that is difficult for all of us sometimes, and for some of us always. (Ask any wife!)
3. No one listens well all the time.
4. We will never listen well if we don't want to, or are self-absorbed or preoccupied (busyness, sickness, stress, discomfort, emotional pain/trauma, defensiveness).
5. It takes a great deal of energy to really listen. It is very tiring. And it can **never** be faked. (If your mind is elsewhere, the person you are with will know it at some level of their consciousness).

“Listening means immersing oneself in the world of another human being; allowing oneself to resonate to the spoken and, more important, the unspoken messages; and being aware of one's own feelings, images, fantasies, and associations.”

Hans H. Strupp and Jeffrey L. Binder, *“Psychotherapy in a New Key”*, Basic Books, 1984.

6. Listen for what is there beneath the words, in what is half-said, hinted at, alluded to, or not said at all.
7. Listening is not just one way. It requires dialogue, as the listener responds, clarifies, questions, restates, supports, confronts, encourages, agrees, and imparts information.

How to let someone know that you are listening and hearing what they are saying.

8. If you are, they'll know! It really is extraordinarily rare for us to experience someone who *really listens*, i.e., whose “energy” is being expended towards us as we speak.
9. Use of High and Low Structure questions. A **high** structure restricts the range of possible answers. e.g., “How old are you?”, “How long have you been married?”, “Where do you live?”. A **low** structure question leaves a person wide latitude to go in different directions. e.g., “How can I help you?”, “What's on your mind?”, “What's important to you?”. **Rule of thumb:** At the beginning of a conversation, use more low structure questions and move slowly towards higher structure questions. This helps you to pay attention to what a person is thinking, and not impose your own ideas.

10. Keep listening and responding with low structure questions until you have a reasonable conviction that you understand what they are trying to communicate.
11. If uncertain, reflect back in your own words what you have understood. e.g., “*Let me see if I’m hearing you correctly...*”, “*I think I hear you saying...*”
12. We build credibility when we express what a person feels and means, and likewise lose credibility when we don’t. If you’re not sure, say so!
13. The **mood** and **presence** of the listener is vital. Generally seek a mood of genuine curiosity and supportive helpfulness, but never fake it! If you’re not up to careful listening for some reason, better to say so — “I’m sorry, I’m not really up to listening well at the moment. Can we come back to this?”

How to deal with a person who is experiencing profound emotions.

14. Expect emotions to be strong. They are a sign of good health! Tears are the language of the heart, but most adults *apologise* when they weep in front of someone else!
15. Be aware of your own comfort/discomfort levels. Few are comfortable to move towards pain, distress, anger, fear or shame without embarrassment or defensiveness. (As evidenced by things like advice-giving, quick comfort, personal embarrassment, discomfort, distancing, intellectualising, changing the topic, etc).
16. Learn to stay **quietly** in the presence of those with strong emotions.
17. Allow people to weep, and let them know (not necessarily with words) that their pain is legitimate and you can acknowledge it.
18. Move *towards* the person feeling strong emotion, not *away from* him or her.
19. Learn to say NOTHING when you have nothing to say. Especially when you sense an inner pressure to find words.
20. Remember, anger is never a primary emotion. There’s often a deeper emotion underneath. It is very often an expression of shame or fear.
21. Watch your tendencies with an angry person to become defensive, or to criticise or accuse.

Some grandfatherly words from one who has made every mistake in the book!

DO...

22. ...seek feedback about your mannerisms and style of relating from a few who know you well. “*What are some ways it can be difficult to speak easily with me?*”
23. ...identify the kinds of people you’re more likely to find difficult or easy to talk to.
24. ...pay attention to *the reason* someone might be asking you a question or telling you something.
25. ...be a good observer of what’s happening in the here-and-now.

26. ...acknowledge your own limitations, and allow yourself to fail.
27. ...be aware of how much time the other person has in a conversation

DON'T...

28. ...finish people's sentences.
29. ...be quick to provide "comfort" to those in pain, it only robs them of their pain.
30. ...be afraid of sensitive humour in the context of pain and intensity.
31. ...make dogmatic statements about another person's views or emotions. (A clear, but "tentative" expression allows for further question, disagreement, and prevents premature closure).