

Basic Listening Guidelines

'Helping and other deep interpersonal transactions demand a certain intensity of presence. Attending, or the way you orient yourself physically and psychologically to [others] contributes to this presence. Effective attending does two things: It tells [others] that you are with them, and it puts you in a position to listen.... attentive presence can invite or encourage them to trust you, open up, and explore significant dimensions of their problems.' (Gerard Egan 'The Skilled Helper' 4th ed.(Boston: Cengage,) p108)

1. Create a helpful environment if you are able:

- ensure privacy and freedom from interruption (turn your phone off)
- ensure that the room conveys a sense of peace and calm and is warm and comfortable
- avoiding sitting behind a desk or table which would create a physical barrier between you and the other person
- position the chairs at an angle to avoid staring directly at each other, but with the ability to easily look at each other and ensure you are at the same height so you are 'on equal terms'

2. Be fully present: show receptiveness, interest and availability:

This needs to be conveyed *physically* by means of body messages:

- *relaxed body posture* (without slumping or slouching)
- *upright posture or even lean slightly forwards*
- *physical openness* (i.e. facing the speaker with your body, not just your face)
- *respect other's personal space*
- *maintain a comfortable level of eye contact* (too much or staring can be threatening or confronting; too little may communicate lack of interest, boredom or tension)
- *appropriate facial expressions* (a friendly, relaxed facial expression conveys interest and warmth, but remember your facial expression needs to show that you understand their feelings)
- *use of appropriate gestures such as head nods* (head nods are rewarding and convey interest; arm and hand gestures can also communicate responsiveness providing they are not excessive)
- *appropriate use of touch* (it can be appropriate to use touch in a helping relationship, however touch is a very sensitive area. It can be experienced as an invasion of personal space and if the intensity or duration of touch is too long, it may cause the person discomfort or be confusing.

3. Keeping calm even when you don't feel calm.

You may at times feel upset, shocked, thrown or even panicky when listening to someone. However, it is important to remain calm. A calm manner will help the person to relax and to feel accepted.

4. Listening with undivided attention

Good listening involves the capacity to hear and remember accurately what has been said. It is important, therefore, to be aware of those factors or *barriers* that may hinder this process (e.g. the person's difficulty in expressing her/himself; distracting mannerisms; the listener's own agenda, thought or feelings; the

listener's tendency to prejudge or listen selectively; unconscious anxieties; tiredness or emotional exhaustion). Learning the skill of listening involves learning to listen accurately *despite* all these potential barriers. *Later in the session there will be the opportunity to identify our barriers to listening.*

5. Not interrupting or changing the subject unnecessarily or abruptly

Good listening 'tracks' the other person, staying with them as the story unfolds. Egan in 'The Skilled Helper' points out, however, that there are times when interrupting can be facilitative. For example, when the person is engaged in a long monologue it may be necessary for the listener to interrupt the monologue gently to check the accuracy of her/his understanding or to communicate her/his understanding to the speaker (e.g. 'You've shared a great deal with me over the last few minutes and I'd like to make sure that I've really heard and understood what you've been saying....'). Egan distinguishes between *benign interrupting* which promotes *the dialogue* between listener and speaker, and *malignant interrupting* which cuts the speaker off in mid-thought because *the listener* has something they want to say.

6. Avoid speaking too soon, too often and too much

This can both stop the speaker's flow and cause them to feel devalued.

7. Learn to tolerate pauses and silences that are a little longer than is normal in conversations

This allows the speaker time to pause, whether it is to take breath, to take stock, to take up something new, to find the right words to say, to summon up the courage to share something difficult, to reflect on what they have just said or to 'listen' to their own thoughts and feelings. It also reduces the danger of the listener imposing their own agenda on the person.

8. Keep questions to a minimum.

Asking a pertinent question is helpful when you need precise information, need to open up an area of exploration, when you are not clear what is meant, or when you need to clarify an obscure message. Using too many questions can seem like an interrogation and feel threatening or pressurizing. *There will be the opportunity to practise using questions appropriately.*

9. In general avoid sharing your own problems and experiences

Otherwise the relationship may feel more like a friendship or at least reciprocal.

10. Avoid giving advice or interpretations or using clichés

This can disempower the other person or belittle their experience.

11. Avoid pretending to understand.

If you cannot follow what the person is saying don't feign understanding, it is better to say so and ask for further explanation: 'I'm not sure I understand what you're saying there. I wonder if you could explain that a little further.'

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