

## Active Listening

Human relationships revolve around communication. This is true of good relationships and it's also true of dysfunctional relationships. There are, of course, many facets to communication including direct speech and non-verbal cues. Communication in all its forms matters. At CCE, of course, we are going for understandings and practices that promote good communication. We understand that this requires particular skills.

Active Listening is one of the crucial skills required for effective interpersonal communication. Active Listening is a special and particular kind of communication practice. And though it is the basic training for anyone in the helping professions (counseling/therapy), understanding the importance of listening well is crucial to everyday conversation.

From human developmental research it is well understood that human beings create our basic identities in relation to how we are mirrored by others in childhood. We know ourselves through other peoples' eyes and ears and touch. This mirroring is often explicit in the tone and language of our caretakers. It is also subtle, for example, in the way we are held, the frequency of being touched, and so on. Early childhood is a rich stew of reflective experience. But what is crucial, and well documented, is that identities develop as a dynamic response to how we are mirrored by others.

And here is what is important for our purposes: We never lose the desire to be seen well. We never lose the need to tell our story and to be mirrored back generously. We all want and need to be "understood". This basic human need never goes away.

Unfortunately many people were not mirrored well as children, and as they grow they do not know how to mirror others well in return. And so a lot of interpersonal conversation is scattered and selfish. Many people are desperate for reflection, and always turn conversation back on themselves. In fact, a lot of "conversation" is actually simultaneous monologue. It goes this way very often:

A: Wow, I'm having a bad day

B: Yeah, me too

A: I just don't feel good, and can't get my paper done

B: Yeah, I was trying to go home for the weekend, but I just can't organize it

Or variations of this when no one really gets heard at all. This is understandable. Remember, we all want to be understood, and we are all looking for positive reflection. If we don't know how to take turns, if we don't trust that our turn is coming, we will put our story out there over and over and over in an attempt to get the mirroring we need.

Active Listening addresses this need. The hallmark of Active Listening is that one person puts his or her attention and concern at the service of the other. Active Listening is not an equal opportunity communication experience. It is one person, the Listener, providing particular and specific attention to a Speaker. This separation of functions is

training. It addresses the fundamental need all human beings have to be understood, to be heard well. Active Listening practices are the fundamental means for providing this kind of reflection to another person. There simply is nothing more important than providing a true ear for someone else's story, and Active Listening skills are fundamental to this practice.

Active Listening, then, is the practice of opening oneself to the other person, and in a disciplined way, reflecting the Speaker's experience and words again and again. There are specific techniques involved.

Active Listening is fundamental to training for anyone in the helping professions. It is the basic tool in a psychologist or counselor's toolkit. And yes, therapists are expert at Active Listening, because it's what they are paid for! That said, everyone of us can utilize this basic practice. It does require discipline to do it well. Here are basic tools in the toolkit of good communication:

### **Mirroring (repeating back a speaker's words exactly)**

Speaker: I'm confused and frustrated that my mom won't buy the ticket

Active Listener: You're confused and frustrated your mom won't buy the ticket

This might sound a little strange, and written out like this it might even seem simplistic. But in terms of empathy and communication, mirroring is a powerful way for one person to let another person know *they really heard what was said*.

### **Reflecting (paraphrasing a speaker's words)**

Speaker: I'm confused and frustrated that my mom won't buy the ticket

Active Listener: I see you're having strong feelings because your mom isn't supporting the trip

We don't have to be trained psychotherapists to utilize these basic and essential communication principles. With awareness and practice, we can do this for each other. In fact, any conscious practice at developing empathic communication starts with Active Listening. The following is a sequence for practicing basic Active Listening skills. Please note, all kinds of things come up when we structure a conversation this explicitly. Some people struggle telling their story at all. Some people struggle with listening carefully...they just can't "help themselves" from intervening. Remind people that this is a lifelong practice. It is something to work toward. The ability to fully listen to another person is actually a deep life practice, and takes time, attention and effort to achieve.

## *An Active Listening Sequence*

An Active Listening session is *not a normal conversation*. It's practice for fully listening and hearing other people. The whole point of this is that one person speaks, the other listens. It's an opportunity to practice really paying attention to another person. It is *not* an opportunity for giving advice, for interjecting, or for spinning off into personal tangents. Absolutely, this is hard. It takes a lot of discipline to just listen and not interject. And for some, it's hard to reveal the self. This is very specific practice.

When I do this in a big group, there is usually one pair that simply cannot do it. Either one of the people has "nothing to say", or the pair cannot keep from chattering away at each other. I actually find it extraordinary that someone cannot fill 3 minutes of talking about an important personal issue. I always assume that something else is going on that makes this exercise challenging, perhaps embarrassment or shame or fear. But it is important to establish the roles in the Active Listening work: the Speaker speaks, the Listener listens. Period! Very clear difference in functions. It is not an open conversation.

Important safety note: In the following sequence I encourage people to be as personal and revealing about their lives as they feel comfortable doing. No one should feel pressured to reveal their inner life beyond their own comfort zone. When I do this as a learning experience, the point is practicing listening skills. It is not about prying open people's inner worlds. That said, the more personal and honest the communication, the more engaging the exercise will be for everyone.

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Divide into pairs and situate yourselves around the room so each pair is comfortable and has a bubble of private space around them.

In each pair, decide who is the first Speaker & who is the first Listener.

Speaker speaks one word

Listener repeats it back as if they are a tape recorder: same tone, speed and nuance

Do this a number of times, asking the Speaker to experiment with his/her voice and tone

Speaker speaks a short sentence

Listener repeats the sentence back exactly

Do this 2-3 times

Speaker speaks about something that happened that day (about 1 minute)

Listener reflects it back as closely as possible for content...Listener uses his or her own language, but content as close as possible to the Speaker's story. It sounds like this: "You woke up late this morning and you forgot to eat, and this was hard because you had to finish a job, and you were worried that your boss...."

Speaker speaks about something that *really matters* to him/her (I base this prompt on the group I'm working with)...this is a very personal issue (about 3-4 minutes)

Listener reflects it back as closely as possible for content ...no interpretation, no comment, no advice, just a retelling of what they actually heard (1-2 minutes)

Speaker adds details or clarifies, giving additional information (1-2 minutes)

Listener takes the opportunity to list off all the questions that have been accumulating as the Listener was listening to the Speaker's story. Don't over-edit the questions. Ask everything you want to know. These can be very personal questions. No one will be required to answer anything they don't want to. The Speaker just listens to the list without responding at all (about 2 minutes)

The Speaker then has the opportunity to answer any or all of the questions they are comfortable answering (2-3 minutes)

Listener asks one more question in response to the Speaker's answers, encouraging the Speaker to go a little deeper (30 seconds)

Speaker answers the additional question if they are comfortable doing so (2-3 minutes)

PAUSE

Switch roles, and do the sequence again.

Debrief, allowing both people to speak openly about the process (4-5 minutes)

Group debrief: Everyone shares what the process was like. Some people will discuss speaking as hard. Others listening as hard. I often ask if being listened to like this brought up any insights or surprises. I also ask what it felt like to be listened to so thoroughly. For some it will be miraculous, for others disturbing. This is complex stuff.

Closure: however you do it. I count to 3 and do a big group CLAP.

Additional sequence:

This basic sequence can be altered. For example, a round of Speaking and Listening can be added which takes the Speaker deeper into his or her material.

This process can also be used as a problem-solving tool. For example the original prompt can be: "Speaker speak about a specific problem or issue you are trying to solve". After the questioning and answer portions of the exercise, invite the Listener to give suggestions on solving the issue. It goes this way:

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everything you want to know. These can be very personal questions. No one will be required to answer anything they don't want to. The Speaker just listens to the list without responding at all (about 2 minutes)

The Speaker then has the opportunity to answer any or all of the questions they are comfortable answering (2-3 minutes)

Listener takes the opportunity to make suggestions on solving the issue or problem  
Speaker takes the opportunity to respond to the suggestions

Listener asks questions about that response  
Speaker responds and adds details

Debrief