

Empathic Listening

'the most precious gift you can give'

“When the other person is hurting, confused, troubled, anxious, alienated, terrified; or when he or she is doubtful of self-worth, uncertain as to identify, then understanding is called for.

The gentle and sensitive companionship of an empathic stance... provides illumination and healing. In such situations deep understanding is, I believe, the most precious gift one can give to another”.

Carl Rogers

Introduction

Most of us could do with a 'damn good listening to' at times. This is rarely likely in a normal conversation, but requires the person they are with to give them consideration and their undivided attention. This can happen with empathic listening, also known as deep, mindless, supportive, reflective or active listening. It is a way of reaching out to those we love, work with or have a responsibility for, it costs us nothing financially, yet can help others let off steam, feel valued and work towards resolving personal issues or challenges. It involves listening to another with a focus on them, rather than ourselves, so that we can seek to understand and empathise with them and demonstrating our attention through verbal and physical responses.

As Carl Rogers said, 'We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know....when someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mould you, it feels damn good'!

As well as helping the person we are listening to, there are benefits that we can gain from the process. In getting ready to hear another clearly we need to set aside our pre-conceptions and biases, to understand our own thought processes. Empathic listening is a life skill, the ability to spot gaps in their understanding can help parents, teachers, group leaders, employers, friends and partners experience how those they are with understand the world. A mistaken comment can lead to long term friction, in an organisation, or the break-up of families. Those of us who are introverts, or perhaps a little shy can use the skill to engage with others. Good listeners tend to make great friends, and you don't have to do much of the talking, and we can also gain satisfaction through helping others and being a productive member of society

While researching this article, I was struck by the different angles that came up when we talk with another. Perhaps we are bursting with news, just waiting for an opportunity to bring up a topic we are interested in. We may be listening to learn something, or to frame a reply that focuses on us, or demonstrates our experiences or knowledge. Perhaps we are focusing in different ways with each other – one in a cognitive way on facts and information while the other is engaged with emotion and feelings. Often conversations happen at a superficial, social way to interact with others.

A seven-part gift

Empathic listening occurs when one person is prepared to focus solely on the person they are with, giving their time and attention in different ways which can combine to benefit the other'

Time

In a busy world with multiple calls on our attention, the gift of time carries real value. Turning off your 'phone, avoiding interruptions and ensuring that the conversation is all about them and their needs shows that the person you are with is important to you, worth being with.

Attention

As well as giving another our time, it is important to also give them our full attention. Humans have been described as cognitive misers – sparing with our cognitive resources if thinking about what to say next, or recollecting past experiences, we may well miss something that has been said or revert to a normal conversation. A response along the lines of 'oh yes, that happened to me as well...' is at risk of shifting the focus away from the person we are listening to and making them into someone who we are taking with – or worse, someone we are talking at.

Respect

Listening to another without interrupting, changing the topic or telling them what to do shows respect, something that may have been missing from their lives, and shows that we accept them as equals with their own point of view.

Honesty

Sometimes friends and family members feel uncomfortable talking about an approaching death, discounting a patient's condition. If someone knows they are dying and has come to terms with that, denying this ('oh no, you'll outlive us all') may make the visitor feel better, but potentially jars with the reality of the situation and can be disrespectful. In the same way, being honest when listening to another describe the reality of their life and challenges

can help them come to terms with them while making light of issues can come across as critical or judgmental.

Questions

These are best used, where necessary to clarify your understanding of the situation of the other, to see the world through their eyes. They should not be used to pry for our own benefit, or to fill a gap we feel uncomfortable with – holding a silence can be very powerful, and help the other work through issues that they would happily be diverted from. The right questions will help show that you are thinking along the same lines, while encouraging clarification. In framing their reply, it may be that the person you are with gains a different perspective. I have found that sometimes a single word will stand out in a sentence – either the word chosen, or the feeling it is said with. It may be an invitation to talk about something and just repeating the word as a question can allow that to happen.

Understanding

As the saying goes, a problem shared is a problem halved. Being heard – and understood - by another can provide comfort, support and validation for someone you may have previously felt alone, abandoned or misunderstood.

Feedback

Rather than making statements of fact, tentative feedback that is open to correction gives those we are listening to the opportunity to either confirm, clarify or correct our understanding of what they have said. In doing this they may see the wider picture, perhaps gaining fresh insights. They are the expert in themselves, we are the student. Feedback is also an opportunity to show that we have been attentive, that they are worth listening to. Asking rather than telling, even if an answer or solution seems clear to you, lets people find their own solutions. This can help build confidence, and we will tend to value more highly answers that we think we've found on our own.

Before you start listening

Imagine you are in a space craft, and see another one nearby, not following the same course and also tumbling and spinning. You can change your speed and direction to come alongside fairly easily, but cannot dock yet. Rather than deciding that they are obviously in trouble, grappling with it in some way and towing it your direction, you decide instead to make contact first and find out more. Before you can dock with them it will be necessary to match the other three directions of roll, pitch and yaw. Failing to do so could knock them even further off course, or cause damage. That is how empathic listening works, we first seek to

understand the reality of others rather than making assumptions or taking action based on our own views and perspectives.

Before we can start listening then it is important to start from as neutral position as possible, with our perceptions put to one side so we can engage with the other as a fellow traveller, rather than as a rescuer, mentor, guide, instructor or inspector. Just as cooking utensils need to be cleaned between preparing different meals to avoid contaminating flavours. There are two different concepts that may help with this, the Drama triangle proposed by Stephen Karpman and Carl Roger's three main core conditions for person-centred counselling. Both can help identify any unhelpful baggage we have before starting to listen to another as well as guiding us through the encounter itself.

The Drama triangle

This looks at roles that we can all take at times in life, consciously or subconsciously, where we do not engage honestly with others and fail to treat them in an authentic way.

Persecutor

In this position, we treat the other as a Victim, discounting their worth. Perhaps we could be blaming them for being in their current position, or for not taking steps to improve things for themselves.

Rescuer

This involves helping another in a way that involves undermining their autonomy, or even when they don't want or need help. The classic example would be picking up a box of tissues from the table without being asked, and handing them to someone who is crying. If they are able to pick them up on their own, or ask for them, then our actions discount their ability while fluffing up our sense of value. Not to be confused with being a rescuer (small 'r') with an authentic respectful and caring attitude.

Victim

If we were to discount our ability to deal with our own issues, it would be possible to start a conversation looking for an opportunity to play the role of Victim ourselves, seeking to be rescued ourselves 'Hah! You think you've got problems, let me tell you about mine...'. Even if in the position of being a genuine victim, we would not be able to offer empathic listening at this time.

Three Core Conditions

Emotive listening is based on Carl Rogers three core conditions for therapy. These form an important part of both counselling and pastoral care, helping to build a strong and constructive partnership with the client or patient. As the most important indicator for

success in therapy is the quality of participation by a client, engaging the client in the process is of high importance.

After intense training to work with substance use clients (drugs and alcohol) in my second placement, we all felt rather overwhelmed. The chief instructor told us not to worry, but just concentrate on the core conditions if we ever felt stuck. She wasn't wrong, clients generally responded very well when engaged with respectfully, honestly and as equals.

Empathy

The ability to understand the experience of others, and to convey this understanding back in a genuine way. For example, just repeating what someone else says is unlikely to achieve this.

Congruence

By extending honesty to others, we can both establish a strong relationship and also model the behaviour for those who have not experienced it before. When congruent, our body and verbal language match our emotions, we behave in a genuine way. It is important to be congruent with ourselves, are we ready and able to listen effectively and without any personal agenda?

Unconditional Positive Regard

While respecting a person unconditionally, we can still separate the person from their behaviour, and from cause of that behaviour. If they manage to successfully address the cause, then hopefully their intrinsic worth will be revealed. Working on the principle that there are no demons, only sick angels, we can assume that anti-social attitudes likely derive from either nature (chemical imbalances, neurological damage) or nurture (negative experiences, particularly in early life). In such cases it is our duty to extend help, respect and compassion where possible, rather than censure or punitive responses alone.

Possible conversation topics

Certain themes can come up when listening empathically, sometimes in the same conversation. Don't try to second-guess or lead, just follow. Be careful if deeper issues come up in the process, and don't get drawn into going outside of your role. Being listened to in this way can be a gateway path to counselling or therapy by a trained and experienced professional as people find talking to another helpful, and can realise more clearly the challenges they face.

Letting off steam

Having a good listener is a great opportunity to have a good rant and put the wrongs of the world to right without interruption. Sometimes expressing frustrations can lead to a change – perhaps along the lines of 'if not you, who? If not now, when? There are times when you can challenge what is said, or end a conversation if necessary. There is no obligation to listen to discriminatory, racist, homophobic or other attacks on others and how you choose to

proceed will probably depend on the person you are talking with, just remember to show empathy. Congruence and unconditional regard.

Log jams

If you put a microphone in front of a speaker you will probably get 'howl round' or feedback as the signal goes round and round, ramping up the volume. In the same way worries and negative thoughts can go round inside our heads, just digging a deeper groove and intensifying over time. Talking with another brings them out into the open, and fears can shrink or even dissolve. We may gain a new insight, revelation or understanding about a challenge just talking about it, or listening to someone else recounting their understanding of the issue.

Lonely

Modern society can be lonely, we are tribal in nature and sometimes just want a fellow human to be with. Even if you are facing challenges and problems yourself you can still bring comfort – two rafts lashed together at sea are more stable than one. Empathic listening allows deep personal contact to be experienced by those who are largely passed ignored by general society.

Life-changing events

This a common topic working in hospital, when the realities of life can disrupt or destroy our carefully made plans. Significant physical and emotional changes may be required, talking through these can help people come to terms with how their future will probably unfold now and plan accordingly.

Afterwards

Take some time for self-reflection and self-care for yourself afterwards, listening in this way can be quite draining, and can bring up issues that affect you. Whatever you have been told, there is one more gift that you can give – confidentiality. You may have been told things as a result of the trust you have built during a conversation, passing details on to others afterwards may well disrespect the person you were talking to. In contrast, keeping secrets, demonstrating that you are a person who can be trusted can benefit both your reputation and sense of self-worth.