

Listen with Full Attention

Listen up! This is really important.

We just talked about how, to solve conflicts, it's necessary to listen to one another, to hear what the other person is saying. From that, all else flows. But it turns out that we're generally not very good at listening. We think we listen well. After all, we've been doing it all our lives. But when we test our listening ability, we quickly find we're not as good at it as we suppose.

The way I have my students check their listening – and improve it – is as follows. I arrange them in pairs. One student is “talker” and the other “listener.” The talker's job is twofold: to generate words for the listener to repeat back, more or less word-for-word, and to check the accuracy of what is repeated. The talker is instructed to not try to say anything too personal or profound, but just to generate some words for the listener to repeat. So he might talk about his hobbies, or what he's studying. If he runs out of steam on one topic, he's to shift to another.

The talker is instructed to only give about three pieces of information at a time and then pause. That way, the listener doesn't have to make any special effort to remember, and can repeat back easily. When the listener repeats back what was said, the talker checks to see whether anything was added or left out. If so, he corrects the listener. If not, he goes on.

The listener's job is to repeat back what she heard. She's not allowed to ask anything, change the subject, or give advice. She can ask a question only if she doesn't understand a word. Or, if her mind went elsewhere and she didn't fully hear what was said, she can ask to hear it again. Otherwise, she simply listens and repeats.

Once the instructions are clear, the talking and listening begin. After ten minutes, the roles are reversed, so each student gets to

experience both. When the whole twenty minute experience concludes, the students are given a few minutes to converse normally, sharing their own experiences, asking questions, and giving advice. Then we reconvene as a full class and discuss what occurred.

Here's an example:

Talker: "My car wouldn't start this morning. Bummer! I knew I'd be late for work. So I called my boss and then triple A."

Listener: "Your car didn't start this morning. That made you late for work. You called your boss and triple A."

Talker: "Yes. It took the tow truck a half hour to arrive. They jumped the car and it started. They told me I should drive the car for fifteen minutes on the freeway, and get a new battery as soon as I could."

Listener: "The tow truck took a half hour to come. When they did, they started the car. Then they told you to drive it on the freeway for fifteen minutes."

Talker: "You forgot that they said to get a new battery. Anyway, I got to work and lucked out. The meeting I was supposed to be in got delayed, so I was able to respond to my emails and still have time to prepare for it."

Listener: "I'm sorry. I got distracted. Would you please repeat that?"

The talker repeats what he said.

Listener: “You got to work. Your meeting was delayed, so you could do your emails and still prepare. But why didn’t you prepare the night before?”

Talker: “No, no questions. Just repeat back.”

You get the idea. It’s pretty straightforward – just listen and repeat. When I reconvene the class after the paired exercise and we talk about it, several things become evident. First, most people find they’re able to listen this way pretty well but not perfectly. And it takes some effort. What makes it easier is when they’re interested in what they’re hearing. But that also makes it more likely that they’ll be tempted to interrupt and ask a question or add something. Plus, when the talker says something that hits home for them, their own thoughts kick in and prevent them from hearing the other person. They listen to what’s in their head instead of their partner.

And this emerges as the crux of the problem most of us encounter about listening well. Our thoughts get in the way of fully attending to what someone else is saying. We can only listen to one thing at a time. And our own thoughts are louder, especially when the topic is relevant to us. Or when we want to defend ourselves, or rebut what is being said, or give advice.

How can we prevent this? How can we quiet our own thoughts so we can really hear what another person is saying? How can we share their experience rather than staying stuck in our own?

Simple (but not easy!). We can direct our full attention toward the other person. When our own thoughts arise, we can ignore them. Often our thoughts won’t develop further, and will immediately cease. Even if they don’t, we can focus on what the person we’re listening to is saying rather than our own internal dialogue.

We can also let go of acting on the impulses to interrupt, to interject something, to comment, to question, to give advice. Unlike the exercise I use in class, there's no need to repeat back what has been said. In fact, that would seem contrived and unnatural. Instead, we can, again and again, return to just listening, and doing so completely. I like to say it feels like listening with your whole body, your whole being. After a while, your internal chatter goes away and your entire experience is what is being presented by the other. At that point, the two of you have become one mind. And something extraordinary, and extraordinarily helpful, happens.

It's very different from the usual way we interact. Rather than listening with "half an ear" – we're generally more preoccupied with our own thoughts than with what we're hearing – we listen with everything we have. This creates greatly enhanced connection and insight.

To illustrate this, I have students imagine that they're invisible. We fantasize that we fly over to the cafeteria in the student center and hover next to two friends who are eating and conversing. What do we hear?

Person one says, "Blah, blah, blah," and talks about himself. Person two then says, "Blah, blah, blah," and talks about herself. And so it goes, back and forth, each person talking about themselves and stopping so the other one can do so, too.

I call this the "me-me game." Each person is "me-ing." If one person goes on too long, the other breaks in so she can get her turn. The ball keeps getting passed back and forth, and no one gets deep into anything. They just stay on the surface and talk about themselves. This is normal social conversation.

I joke that men and women are slightly different in this regard. If you're a man and express a difficulty, your buddy will immediately say, "When that happened to me, I..."

If you're a woman and talk about what's troubling you, your female friend will probably wait a little longer before jumping in with, "You poor thing. You must feel awful." So far, so good. She's actually talking about you. But then she'll go on, "When I experienced that, I..."

So we're right back to each person talking about her- or himself. And no one getting to delve very deeply, without interruption, into anything. I tell my class, "If you decide to listen fully – and we've seen that it's not that hard to do, and with practice it gets much easier – you'll create a very special and valuable sort of interaction. People are rarely, if ever, listened to this way, fully. When you do so, magic can happen."

Then I go on to describe what will transpire. "The person you're listening to will pause automatically after talking for a little while. She's accustomed to normal conversation, so she expects you to speak. She knows she'll be interrupted if she doesn't give you your turn.

"When she pauses, if, instead of jumping in, you say, 'Go on. What happened then?' she'll look at you for a moment and will then continue. And pause again after a few sentences and wait for you to talk.

"If you again say, 'Uh, huh. I'm listening. Go on,' she'll regard you with a slightly puzzled expression and resume talking. And, after a few repetitions of this pattern, without her consciously realizing what's happening, she'll get the idea she's really being listened to with full, engaged attention and without interruption. And then the floodgates will open."

Often, when listened to in this way, people will open up to you as they never have before. I encourage my younger students to try this with their parents, either in person or on the phone. I tell my adult students

to try it with their kids. The next week, when we discuss what happened, they often report that something major shifted, and that they learned more about their parent or child in one conversation than they had in years, or maybe ever.

It's such a rarity to be listened to in this way, unreservedly, that it is likely to have two powerful effects. First, it creates a far greater sense of connection. This alone would be sufficient to highly recommend it at appropriate times with appropriate people. Second, it creates the opportunity for real insight. When people are uninterrupted and supported in self-exploration, they go deeper into themselves and their concerns. Often, they analyze and solve their own problems in a way no one could have anticipated initially.

Therapists will tell you the problem that is presented at first – the “presenting problem” – frequently doesn't turn out to be the real, underlying problem. It takes time, and the right environment, for that problem to surface, be examined, and, if possible, solved. A large part of creating an appropriate environment, many of us who do therapy have found, is the practice of listening well – with full understanding, and without interruption, judgment, or the offering of advice. We “listen mindfully.”

Many times, what happens in therapy, and can happen in any social interaction when someone is sharing a concern, is that the problem is clarified, various solutions are imagined, and a viable way forward emerges. All this is enabled by the receptivity of the listener.

Because she is accompanied and supported as she explores, the person with the difficulty is empowered to acknowledge, understand, and confront it. And to decide on her own to surmount it and how best to do so.

The therapist's expertise is helpful. But what is most helpful is her accepting, nonjudgmental, supportive presence. Through her ability

to listen well, the therapist creates the precondition for real self-discovery and growth.

Regardless of whether your next conversation with someone you care about is going to, or needs to, lead to profound insight, listening with full attention will strengthen your connection and enhance satisfaction with the relationship. If you're having a conflict, listening in this way will greatly help in resolving it.

I encourage you to experiment with this. It could become a positive habit, the way you choose to listen most, or all, of the time. You'll learn much, resolve your differences, be of appreciable help, and greatly increase the richness of your interactions.

– from *Be the Sky, Not the Clouds: The new Mindful Psychology of Happiness and Wellbeing* by Spencer Sherman, PhD