

Effective Active Listening

In NYC, Samaritans' advertisements for hotline volunteers asks: "Can you shut up and listen?" Throughout the world, Samaritans promotes active listening: whether it is being practiced by our hotline volunteers; taught to teachers, guidance counselors and other professional caregivers; or utilized by friends, family members and colleagues when responding to someone who is depressed or in crisis.

A learned skill that takes practice, active listening was brought to the public's attention through the writing of Carl Rogers in his book, *On Becoming A Person*. On a basic level, active listening takes the focus off of the helper and puts it on the person being helped (in our case, the person in crisis). In this way, active listening is not only a very effective form of communication, it also alleviates some of the isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem and feeling that *nobody cares* that often accompanies bouts of depression.

Active listening tells the person in crisis that what he/she is feeling is important and, by association, that he/she is deserving of our time and attention. For the person in crisis, being in communication with someone who is actively listening can be a calming and steadying influence. And most beneficial, it also assists that person in getting his/her feelings out in a safe and supportive environment, thereby acting as an all-important emotional pressure release valve which is a "protective factor" in preventing suicide.

On a basic conceptual level, active listening is a rejection of the traditional communications model developed in the early 1950's that focuses on the *sender of the message*, the person who is initiating the communication and deciding its content, focus and delivery, the common approach for market research, political polling, sales, interviews and all forms of argument (be they legal, academic or parental in nature). The diagram on the next page illustrates the difference between the two in terms of focus and purpose.

Silence

Silence is something that is meant to be shared not filled. Do not be afraid of silence. Used consistently in a balanced manner, silence demonstrates that you are paying attention and respect for the person with whom you are communicating in that it shows patience and the awareness that expressing ones emotions, thoughts and feelings can be a difficult process that takes time. Use silence when you are unsure of what to say or how to respond or to allow a pause or some time for quiet reflection.

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are structured in a way that allows the person with whom you are communicating to respond on his/her own level, without any restrictions or preconceptions. When you use an open-ended question properly, you meet the person you are talking to on his/her own level because the structure and design of the question provides him/her with the opportunity to respond within whatever framework or train of thought they are most comfortable. In this *whatever you want to say is acceptable* context, open-ended questions are ideal for establishing rapport and generating a non-threatening environment.

Examples: "How have you been dealing with your situation?" "What is it that you are finding to be most difficult?" "How is this affecting you now?"

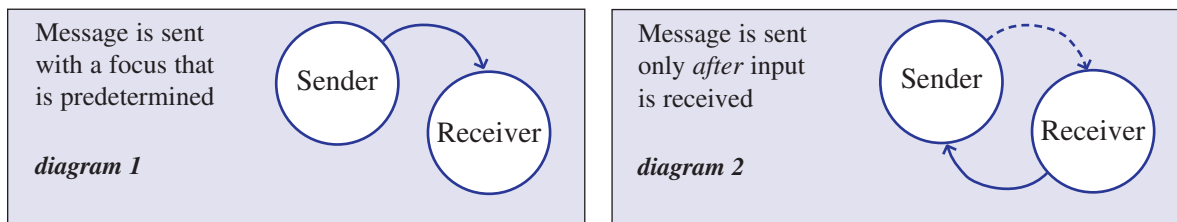
Closed-ended questions

In contrast to open-ended questions, closed-ended questions are very restrictive in that they either confirm or deny a specific issue or point of view. As the name implies, closed-ended questions present a predetermined outcome and, therefore, force the person with whom you are communicating to take an absolute position. Though you may not realize it, when you use a closed-ended question, the thrust of your comment can become manipulative or coercive because it implies a sense of what is right and what is wrong. For instance the simple question "Can you talk to your father about that?" implies you should talk to your father. The seemingly innocent, "Have you thought about going to counseling?" also implies a "should." Yet, when used properly closed-ended questions clarify thoughts and feelings.

Examples: "Do you want to talk about what's going on?" "Would you like to speak again after you've gone to counseling and had a chance to think?" "Has it gotten to the point that you are feeling suicidal?"

Active Listening vs. Traditional Communications

You see who is in charge in traditional communications (diagram 1) and who is most important. The communication is only about the senders' thoughts and agenda. All feedback and input is analyzed with the goal of how it will best allow the delivery of the sender's predetermined message to his audience. The *receiver of the message* is merely the object of the action that the sender wants to take, not the focus.



When you look at the process from the perspective of someone practicing active listening (diagram 2), the sender (in our case, the helper) receives input and feedback *before* he or she shapes their message or determines the direction of the communication, resultingly, it is the person who is on the receiving end of the process who is most important and the focus of the communication.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is the process of taking in what the person has said and, after uncovering its primary components and meaning, reworking it so that it comes out in your own words while retaining the same content (and intent) as that originally stated. When practiced properly, paraphrasing proves that a person is paying attention because for the restatement to "ring true," the listener must have been attentive and focused on what was said. This tool is best used to clarify your understanding and to check for accuracy.

For example: The son says, "I don't know why so many people are upset with me, I didn't do anything." The listener responds, "You're saying that you don't understand why so many people are angry with you?"

"Say more" expressions

Say more expressions get the person with whom you are communicating to probe deeper into his/her thoughts and feelings. This tool is very effective when you are trying to learn more about what someone is thinking or feeling, when you are being asked to give advice or when the conversation seems to be stuck.

For example: The son says, "No one really understands all the things that I am going through." To which the listener responds, "Well, what is it that you want them to understand?"

Acknowledgement

Acknowledging what a person is feeling, thinking or saying is an important rapport-building tool in that it lets the person with whom you are communicating know that you are *taking in* whatever it is that he/she is feeling, can see its impact and recognize its significance to that person. Acknowledging what someone is saying does not mean you necessarily agree with, believe or condone it yourself.

For example: "From what you have said about how this has affected you, it sounds like you are going through a pretty tough time." (best followed by an open-ended question) "How are you handling all this?"

Validation

Validating what a person is feeling, thinking or saying is a stronger form of acknowledgement in that the listener takes a more formal role in the conversation by stating his/her personal understanding of the situation (though you should always be careful not to express your own beliefs or opinions). This tool is very effective in conveying empathy and sensitivity to someone's circumstance.

For example: "From what you have said about how this has affected you, no wonder you are feeling so upset. It sounds like you are dealing with a pretty difficult situation." (again, followed by an open-ended question) "So with all that is going on, how is this impacting your difficulties at school?"