



Alan Ross, in the hotline room in Manhattan, where wise words adorn the wall

ALAN ROSS, SUICIDE HOTLINE DIRECTOR

CAN YOU SHUT UP AND LISTEN?" THIS is the question Alan Ross has been asking for years, as part of an ad campaign he created to recruit volunteers for a 24-hour New York City suicide prevention hotline. Ross, the executive director of the Samaritans of New York (a local branch of a worldwide organization, which receives major funding from the city's Department of Mental Health), is responsible for finding and training the staff. Each year, volunteers answer some 40,000 calls from people whose problems range from relationship conflicts to suicidal depression. In Ross's business, good listening can be a matter of life and death.

Though the stakes aren't as high for most of us, Ross feels our listening ability—or lack thereof—can determine the value of our relationships. Many of us fancy ourselves good listeners, he says, but more often than not, we talk too much. Why? Because we think we're supposed to make everything better. "You don't solve other people's problems for them. Listening is assisting someone in getting through a moment. It's arrogance to think we can analyze the problem and fix it on the spot. [The hotline has an emergency protocol for cases in which someone has overdosed on drugs or is in immediate physical

danger.] I need to give you every opportunity to talk about what you're thinking and feeling," says Ross, who started as a volunteer 17 years ago.

The best listeners, he says, allow the other person to open up. This doesn't necessarily mean listening silently, though. He suggests that when you do talk, you ask open-ended questions like "How are you dealing with this?" instead of yes or no questions such as "Do you really think you should let things go on this way?"

"The latter kind of question is really a judgment," Ross says. "You're not asking—you're telling someone what you think." Instead, Ross says, "Shut up. That's what I tell myself every time I think I have something to say. Stop and put the focus back on the other person."

Ross learned a lot about listening from his parents. Growing up in Texas, he traveled with his father, who was a pitchman on the carnival circuit. "If you're going to be a pitchman or con man, you have to be able to listen," he says. And he describes his mother as the most empathetic ear in the world. "She made me feel connected, supported, and fulfilled. She would say, 'I may not agree with you or share the same values, but I'm always there to listen to you.'"

The real payoff is not that the person will walk away with answers to life's problems but that she will feel validated. "My goal is to allow you to explore what's going on. I don't try to sum it up, make it clear, tie it in a bundle, or come up with a magic answer," Ross says. "I allow it to be real."

—Jennifer Fields