



The Art of Listening

Hearing with an open heart **By Jason Esswein, LMFT**

> **We all know** how important it is to listen - to our children, spouse, friends, or coworkers. The command, "Pay attention!" exists for very good reason. Our attention is the most valuable currency we possess. We can appreciate this when hearing our children command, "Watch me, watch me!" The quality of our attention is intimately linked with our ability to love, nurture, and even heal. However, authentic listening (above and beyond simply noting the sound of someone speaking) requires more than most would expect. Even more is required when we are stressed, angry, or exhausted from the day.

The Chinese word for listening incorporates two symbols – translated as "open" with "heart." This could not be more true. Listening requires us to show up by being fully present, which means several things: First, we are giving someone our undivided, focused attention. We are not making "to do" lists in our mind, waiting for them to finish so we can start talking, or engaging in any other activity which takes us out of the moment.

Second, being fully present requires a willingness to feel uncomfortable, especially when listening to people closest to us. When someone is suffering in any way (particularly with intense grief or anger), it is never pleasant to witness or feel. In fact, the closer we are to the speaker, the more we are likely to be affected by their pain. It is important to become more "comfortable with discomfort," which leads to the third requirement.

It is crucial that we avoid the impulse to "fix" the other person's pain, stress, or other

challenges. It is a knee-jerk reaction with most of us to come up with an immediate "solution" in the form of, "Well, just do this," or "Don't worry about it, everything is going to be okay." One of the most damaging reactions is, "Don't cry," resulting in nothing less than completely shutting a person down. This is akin to "emotional interruption," denying someone the opportunity to feel what is surfacing. Of course, there are exceptions to fixing (e.g., crisis situations or when advice is requested directly and immediately), yet nobody enjoys the experience of being interrupted. The reason we can unwittingly exacerbate pain with the person we're supposed to be listening to brings us to the fourth requirement of genuine listening. It is also the most difficult!

We must be willing and able to be more accepting of OUR OWN grief, anger, and other uncomfortable emotions (regardless of the why, when, and where of their origin). Feelings simply are, and shouldn't be judged, even though they often seem frightening, illogical, and out of our control. What is important is what we do with words and actions and the meaning we attribute to them. It is crucial that we explore and get more comfortable with our feelings and ultimately accept them so we don't "shut the other down" – and simultaneously believe we're helping.

For example, if our spouse or friend begins to cry during a difficult experience, a common response is, "Don't cry." We often follow by touching the person (i.e., patting their back, tapping their knee, etc.). Both of these reactions often pull both parties out of

their current experience. However, expressing and releasing grief may be exactly what they need to eventually heal. Unfortunately, in this situation, the person who was supposedly being listened to often chooses to "swallow" their feelings, disconnect from their center, and take care of the person who appeared to be present and listening.

It can be uncomfortable witnessing the suffering of a fellow human being; however, if we are unaware of or uncomfortable with our own sadness, it can trigger intense internal anxiety, making the impulse to shut the other down highly likely. In short, the more we can allow and accept our own uncomfortable feelings, the more we are able to be present and truly listen with an open heart.

Deeply knowing, loving, and accepting ourselves (feeling comfortable in our own skin) is one of the greatest contributions we can make to others, the world, and ourselves in general. Every time we interact with someone, we have the power to provide the opportunity to experience the world as safe, benevolent, and beautiful or as cold, harsh, and frightening. Becoming a better listener enables others to experience the world as the former.

Cultivating this quality drastically improves our relationships with ourselves, family, friends, and business associates. And ultimately, relationships are what connect us to life itself. •

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