



Good Listening


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Dear Social Service Practitioners,

Those of us who have been trained as social workers or counsellors would know the importance of listening when working with clients. We are trained to listen emphatically and actively which would assure our clients that we are present with them. Listening is also important when working with co-workers and colleagues in order to get work done and to move projects forward. However, though many would acknowledge the importance of listening, we still struggle with being good and effective listeners. This could be due to a variety of reasons such as compassion fatigue, thinking we know better, or being pre-occupied with our own ideas and thinking. In this letter, I will explore ways in which we can become better listeners to both our clients and colleagues.

Back to Basics

Before we delve into what good listening involves, let us first go back to the basics. As many of us would know, listening goes beyond mere hearing. Julian Treasure, in a TED talk, defined listening as “making meaning from sound” (Treasure, 2011) . It involves synthesizing information, making sense of what we hear and responding appropriately to the information that has been shared. Listening also involves making meaning from non-verbal cues such as body language, tone of voice and feelings expressed.

With the above understanding of listening, we can see how listening requires effort and concentration. It requires a person to focus one’s mind and heart on what is being said verbally or non-verbally, with the intent of understanding and responding appropriately. It is not surprising then that good listening is essential for good communication, which is the basic building block of any relationship – be it client-worker or colleague-colleague. 

Why is Listening is so Difficult?

If listening is so fundamental in all relationships, why then do we not do it more often or do it better? There could be many reasons why listening is so difficult. An article on Inc. Magazine lists some bad habits that impede our ability to listen effectively such as, “planning your response while the other person is talking; assuming you know what the other person is about to say; offering advice before being asked; letting your mind wander to something that seems more important” (Zetlin, 2015).

I am sure that many of us have been guilty of at least one of the listed bad habits in our lifetime. If you read through these habits again, you will notice that a common theme across all of them is a pre-occupation with the self – fulfilling one’s desire to be heard or to respond, being distracted by other things or using self as the reference point to interpret what another is saying. Often times, it is our self that prevents us from being good listeners.



At other times, it could be “noises” from elsewhere such as physical noise from the environment, psychological noise from the pressures or worries we face, physiological noise from bodily discomforts or semantic noise from differences in how speaker and listener understand issues (Wrech, Goding, Johnson, & Attias, 2011). Many of these noises are not a direct fault of the listener, but steps can be taken to try to minimize such noises.

What is Involved in Good Listening?

With the right heart, good listening is something that we can develop through training and practice. Below, I will list some helpful tips to develop good listening, which is helpful for any interpersonal communication.

1 Get rid of distractions

People can tell when we are distracted or preoccupied with something, and this affects their willingness to engage and to share. As much as possible, get rid of unwanted noise or distractions that may potentially hinder good listening and sharing. Some examples include choosing a location that is quiet or not bringing your hand phone into a meeting. However, beyond just the physical distractions, we also need to ensure that we try our best to get rid of mental distractions or “psychological noises”. Before a meeting, it is useful to prepare oneself to be mentally present with the clients or people that we meet. This could mean taking some time before the meeting to set aside any unrelated thoughts or worries and to focus one’s mind and heart on the client or meeting at hand.



2 Be slow to speak 🙄

Many of us often find ourselves guilty of interrupting another person before they finish speaking. This may happen because we assume we know what the other person is trying to say, because we want our voice to be heard or because we do not have the patience to wait for the other person to finish speaking. The next time we engage a colleague or client, make a conscious effort to “be slow to speak”. Has the other person finished what he has intended to say? Are you cutting in to finish the person’s sentence, to change the topic or to say what is on your mind? Are you assuming you know what the other person is going to say before he even says it? Even if the other person may be a slow communicator, good listening involves being patient, and giving space and time to the other person to put across his message. When we are slow to speak, we acknowledge that what the other person has to say is important and thereby uphold their worth and dignity as persons. *Remember that the aim of listening is to try to make sense of what is being said, rather than to make your own opinions or thoughts heard.*

3 Be open and non-judgmental

An important part of being a good listener is for others to feel comfortable sharing with you. People want to know that they will be heard without being judged or evaluated for what they say. Being non-judgmental does not mean throwing out all of one’s personal views, values and beliefs, nor does it mean not challenging the views of others. Instead, it means that we do not discriminate against, despise or look down on others who do not hold similar views as us. Part of good listening also involves not minimising the struggles of others, or dismissing the ideas of others when they do not cohere with ours. Even if there may be differences in opinions or beliefs, it must be communicated in a respectful and gentle manner. Many of us may not be aware of our personal biases, and so it’s important that we constantly take part in reflective practice to know how our personal values and beliefs, or even mannerisms affects our engagement with others.



4 Speak with a purpose

Good listening involves purposeful speaking. While we should be slow to speak, good listening does not mean that we do not speak at all. However, when we do speak, it should be with purpose. This involves asking questions that are relevant, clarifying what the other person is trying to say, or letting the other person know that he/ she is being heard.

The Heart of Good Listening

Good listening is probably one of the most important life skills. However, it is one of the skills that is the hardest to hone and perfect. While the tips above may be helpful, the heart of good listening goes beyond just practicing these tips, towards acknowledging the importance of another person by actively paying attention to what they share. As we go on in our work, be it with clients or colleagues, may we continue to strive to become better listeners.

“If you make listening and observation your occupation, you will gain much more than you can by talk.” – Robert Baden-Powell

References

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