

# NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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## IMPROVING YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

Listening is something that we tend to take for granted. Of course, everyone knows how to listen! But sometimes distractions get in the way of people really hearing what the other person is saying. Active (or reflective) listening is a way of listening and responding to another person in such a way that the person feels that they have really been heard. It takes the conversation one step further into the feelings of the speaker. Active listening is not only a very learnable skill—it is also an attitude. If you truly want to listen to people, you need to accept them for who and what they are, not what you want them to be. You have to be focused and attentive. Active listening is hard work!

### ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER?

- ✓ Think about your relationships with the people in your life. If asked, what would they say about how well you listen?
- ✓ Do you often misunderstand people or only vaguely remember what people have said to you?
- ✓ While listening, do you sometimes think about how you will respond to the person, judge what they are saying or what they are wearing, or start to daydream?
- ✓ Do you frequently interrupt a speaker with an idea, suggestion, or to finish his/her sentence?
- ✓ Do people seek you out to talk with?

### WHY LISTEN ACTIVELY?

- Our brain works four times the speed that someone can speak. You have to actively focus on listening so that your mind doesn't wander.
- It enriches you and those around you, and guides other areas of your life.
- It can build trust and respect between people, and prevent misunderstandings that can lead to conflict, frustration or hurt feelings.
- While listening to other people's point of view, you may just learn something new and fascinating!

### TYPES OF LISTENING

- Passive Listening: Listener does not verbally respond to the speaker (e.g., watching television, listening to a joke, in everyday conversations where you aren't interested in more information, etc).
- Active / Reflective Listening: Listener provides verbal and non-verbal feedback in the way of questioning, gestures and paraphrasing. Listener also uses his/her whole body (eyes, relaxed body, etc) to listen to the speaker.
- Empathic Listening: Listener projects oneself into the personality of the speaker in order to better understand that person's emotions or feelings.

### HOW DO YOU LISTEN ACTIVELY?

- **H**earing is the first step...pay close attention to make sure you hear the message correctly.
- **I**nterpretation: Make sure your understanding of the speaker's message is accurate
- **E**valuation. Ask questions, don't jump to conclusions.
- **R**espond. Let the speaker know that you have heard them.

## LISTENING TECHNIQUES

Below are some basic techniques used in active listening. These skills can be practiced and used in one-on-one conversations or in group settings.

- **Attending / Focusing:** Act like a good listener. While you listen to the person speak, it's very important to keep your focus and attention on the person who is talking.
  - Don't talk—listen. People like to get their own opinions or stories across. A good listener lets them do it. If you assert your own position at every opening you will eliminate the benefits of listening. The speaker will not feel respected, their thinking and brainstorming will be inhibited, and they may withhold information out of caution or anger.
  - Shut out or overlook distractions (e.g. phones, unfamiliar accent, speech problem etc.) as best as possible. Stop all non-relevant activities and don't multitask.
  - Be aware of your body language. Lean forward and face the person. Maintain good eye contact. Keep your body posture relaxed. If you get tired, move your body.
  - Focus on the speaker, their words, feelings and body language. Listen to the tone of their voice and rate of speech. Hear what is being said, and what is not being said.
  - Don't interrupt, even to agree with the speaker.
  - Don't jump into the conversation when there is a moment of silence.
  
- **Responding:** It is very important to let the speaker know that you are listening. This will provide encouragement for the speaker to continue talking. Try to convey warmth and caring in your own individual way.
  - Give the speaker non-threatening verbal responses such as "Uh huh" and "Hm-mmm" when appropriate. Check your tone for sincerity.
  - Give the speaker non-verbal responses such as an encouraging nod of your head and non-judging facial expressions.
  - Don't touch the person (unless they initiate it)—even if they seem upset or are crying. Many people don't like to be touched, and giving them a hug may be more for you than for them. Let them know that you acknowledge their sadness by saying phrases such as, "I'm so sorry" or "I understand."
  - Control your emotional "hot buttons." Certain words, issues, situations, etc. can be emotional triggers. When these issues trigger our "hot buttons" we tend to distort, positively or negatively, the message we are hearing. We may tune out or pre-judge the message and/or the speaker.
  
- **Restating / Paraphrasing:** To do this, restate some of the speaker's key points in your own (but fewer) words. Some examples include, "What I hear you saying is...." or "Let me see if I understood you correctly. You said that the experience made you feel....."
  - This lets speaker know that he/she has been heard.
  - This allows the speaker the opportunity to correct any misunderstanding or misinterpretation you might have.
  
- **Clarifying:** This allows you as a listener to ask questions in a supportive manner to make sure that you understand what is being said, get some background information, or to encourage more information from the speaker. It is accomplished by asking questions so that both you and the speaker are confident that you really understand what the speaker is saying.
  - Asking the speaker questions lets them know that you are open to any response that they may have, and that you are really listening and not judging.

- Questions must be asked in a non-interrogating or non-threatening way. "You didn't like that, did you?" sounds threatening and may hinder additional information. However, "How did you like that?" is open and encourages the speaker to respond.
- Eliminates assumptions. As a listener, never jump to conclusions! Ask questions!
- If you didn't understand a meaning of something, ask a question such as "Do you mean...?" or "Did I understand that you...?" This will make the speaker feel really listened to and cared about.
- Allows you to gather more facts and details (e.g., "What happened before this took place?")
- Encourages elaboration (e.g. "What happened next?")
- Encourages discovery (e.g. "What do you feel are your options at this point?")

There are two types of questions you can ask, each dictating how much information you will get from the speaker.

- *Closed-Ended Questions:* They require only a "yes" or "no" response (e.g. "Was your dinner good?")
  - *Open-Ended Questions:* They invite more input from the speaker (e.g. "What was good about your dinner?")
- **Reflecting:** This is the art of reflecting back to the speaker any feelings, experiences or content that has been heard or perceived through clues.
    - Interpret tentatively what you heard. If appropriate, you might say something like, "It sounds as if that experience made you feel sad. Is that true?"
    - Watch for non-verbal cues that might contradict what the speaker is saying verbally. If verbal and non-verbal cues don't match, check it out with the speaker.
  - **Feedback:** This involves sharing your feelings/reactions to the speaker. It means sharing your perception of what the speaker's experience was. Some examples of feedback include: "Wow, as I've been listening I get a sense that this was \_\_\_\_\_ for you. Is that correct?" or "What you've just told me must have been \_\_\_\_\_ for you. Thanks for trusting me to share your experience with you."
    - It should be immediate, honest and supportive of the speaker's need to share this information with you.
    - If appropriate, share perceptions of the other person's ideas or feelings, disclosing relevant personal information. Do not derail the conversation in another direction and do not take over the conversation.
    - Summarize by bringing together in some way the speaker's feelings and experiences, thus providing a focus.
    - Don't give advice, even if the person asks for it. Ask them, "How do you see it being solved?" Suggestions from others can be provided later.
    - Thank the speaker for sharing. Acknowledge how hard it might have been for them. Let the person know that you respect their thoughts and opinions.

*"Nothing feels so good as being understood, not evaluated or judged. When I try to share some feeling aspect of myself and my communication is met with evaluation, reassurance, distortion of my meaning, I know what it is to be alone." (Carl Rogers, psychologist)*

## BARRIERS TO LISTENING

While listening to someone, there are many barriers that can prevent a person from really hearing what is being said. These barriers come from both the outside as well as the inside.

- **External Barriers:** These are the various things that happen around you, such as noises, clutter, and other interruptions, that act as barriers to active listening. Before you start to actively listen to someone, try to eliminate as many of these external barriers (e.g. turn off your cell phone, put down another task that you are doing, etc.)
- **Internal Barriers Within the Listener:** There are also many barriers to active listening that come from within the listener. They include things such as past experiences, prejudices, assumptions made, certain attitudes, and personality traits, etc. that affect how well you truly hear what is said. Here are some samples:
  - Comparing: Trying to figure out how what is being said is better/worse than something else (e.g. “Does she think that she is the only unhappy person? My problem is so much bigger than hers.”)
  - Personal Experience: Your own past experience can leave “emotional cotton” in your ears. This can cause you to misinterpret what someone is saying based on your own personal experience – not there’s.
  - Automatic Talking: Listener responds to the first recognized word speaker says; not to the overall meaning of what the speaker has said.
  - Mind-Reading: Thinking in advance that you know what someone is going to say. This can lead to mentally “tuning out” before the speaker is finished talking, or worse yet, interrupting the person to finish their sentence. In either case, this leads to misunderstanding, frustration, and possibly even anger.
  - Rehearsing: Trying to figure out what you are going to say in response. Instead of listening to the person, you are thinking about your response to them.
  - Judging: Discounting or judging the speaker’s values and therefore writing off what the person is saying. This distorts your ability to really hear their message. (e.g. “Look at that haircut” or “He’s loud and obnoxious.”)
  - Day Dreaming: Something the speaker says has triggered your own thought process and you start to day dream.
  - Fixing / Advising: This is the tendency to only listen initially to the speaker, then begin to search for a fix or advice to offer the person. Note: People overall do not want to be “fixed”, and most suggestions will be disregarded (unless specifically asked for) and may result in anger toward the fixer.
  - Sparring: You focus on things that you disagree with and will verbally attack the person when they are finished speaking. You fail to take into consideration that this person’s experiences are unique, and that only he/she is the expert on themselves.
  - Filtering / Twisting the Message: You only hear what you want to hear and ignore everything else. You do not really hear what is being said.
  - Making Assumptions: This is the process of coming to some kind of conclusion about someone or something with incomplete information. Assumptions about people are made constantly, and can severely limit your ability to communicate effectively and honestly with other people.
  - Perceptual Errors: Perceptions of people and events are often distorted due to the failure to consider important information. You can overemphasize certain things, while downplaying others. This process is affected by a number of factors: age, health, sex, culture, social roles, previous experiences, and even self-concept. People tend to judge others on the basis of how they view ourselves.

- **Barriers Within the Speaker:** Sometimes the barriers come from the speaker themselves, which can make true communication difficult. They include:
  - Expectations: Speakers may sometimes have certain expectations of the listener and these are often not expressed to others. This is where clarifying what the speaker has said and asking pertinent questions is important.
  - Risk Taking: Taking risks in communication can be scary but necessary. Often the speaker has this silent question: “If I risk myself and this is all I’ve got, what will happen if I am rejected?” That is why it is very important as a listener to accept and respect the person for what he/she is.
  - Avoidance: A speaker may avoid certain subjects or disclosures if they feel it might be unsafe to talk about for a variety of reasons. That is why it is important to let speakers say what they want without fear of being judged, ridiculed or verbally attacked.
  - Speaking in Code: This refers to speaking in a language or jargon that is only understood by some people—not all. Even though it is usually done with realizing it, it’s not polite and keeps understanding low. This can be overcome by the listener asking open-ended questions for clarification.
  - Boundary: A boundary is something you have developed that defines what is good or bad for you. These are accumulated during our lifetime for protection and can become a learned method of existing. Some people have no boundaries and it often gets them into trouble. They may offer far more information than what is asked for and may become a turnoff to others.

### STEPS FOR CONTROLLING EMOTIONAL “HOT BUTTONS”

Sometimes something a person says triggers an emotional response in us, many times due to a past experience. In order to minimize the response, try some of these techniques.

- Listen attentively without interrupting. Take several deep breaths to help you control your physical reaction.
- Make a conscious choice about your response. You can get angry, look for a solution, or ignore it. Trying to solve the problem is the best way to keep it from happening again.
- Acknowledge the other person’s feelings. Make it okay for them to feel the way they do.
- Ask objective questions for clarification. Open-ended questions are especially useful.
- Try to see the other persons’ point of view. You don’t have to agree—just understand it.
- Stick to the subject. Define your problem and don’t let other issues interfere.
- When appropriate, express your point of view. Don’t try to prove your point of view. Present your evidence without backing the other person into a corner or being accusatory.
- Explain why you feel the way you do. A reasonable explanation can often take the sting out of an emotional issue.
- If a conflict does occur, work out a “win-win” plan. Make sure your solution is fair and workable for both (or all) of the people involved.

### THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ✓ Keep an open mind. Set aside your prejudices and opinions.
- ✓ If the speaker becomes quiet, allow them the time to gather their thoughts and process information before you jump into the conversation. Periods of silence can be very cathartic.
- ✓ Active listening does not mean you agree with, but rather understand, what the other person is saying. Acceptance is different from agreement.
- ✓ Acknowledge any personal emotional state. Try to suspend your emotions or just passively listen.
- ✓ All feelings are acceptable, but not all behaviors. A person might express feelings of anger, which is fine. However, it is not okay for a person to physically attack in anger.

## USING EMPATHIC LISTENING IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

### WHAT IS EMPATHY?

Empathy is the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes; to project yourself into the personality of another person in order to better understand that person's emotions or feelings. To truly empathize with someone, you must ignore your own perception of the situation for the moment, and accept the speaker's feelings, thoughts, and ideas about the situation. It does not mean that you agree with the other person – it just means that you understand them.

### WHY USE EMPATHIC LISTENING?

Most mediators use empathic listening skills during conflict resolution. Why? Because they know that true problem solving cannot begin until all persons involved feel that they have been heard and understood. And that is the goal of empathic listening.

Usually the parties in conflict have been talking at each other; not with each usually resulting in misunderstanding, hurt and mistrust. They are commonly locked into positions that they know the other person will not accept. The parties tend to be close minded, distrustful of each other, and often angry, frustrated or hurt. In order for real communication to occur, each person must be willing to really listen to the other person without prejudice. If both parties can do this, the chance of being able to solve a mutual problem becomes much greater.

### BENEFITS OF EMPATHIC LISTENING:

- It forces people to listen attentively to others. They can talk "to" each other, not "at" each other.
- It avoids misunderstanding, as people have to confirm that they really understand what the other person has said.
- It tends to open people up, to get them to say more, and encourages the surfacing of information
- It builds trust, teamwork, cooperation and respect
- It enables people to release their emotions in a safe environment
- It reduces tension and stress.
- It creates a safe environment that is conducive to collaborative problem solving

### TIPS TO LISTEN EMPATHICALLY:

- Be willing to let the other person dominate the discussion
- Be attentive to what is being said
- Be careful not to interrupt the flow of thought
- Be sensitive to the emotions being expressed
- Be able to reflect back to the speaker the substance and feelings they have expressed

### STEPS IN EMPATHIC LISTENING

This technique can work either between the two persons in conflict, with a third person acting as mediator, or even in a group. The best results happen if every person involved uses empathic listening. Each party needs to understand at the onset that everyone involved will get a chance to speak; therefore it is imperative that while the other person is speaking that they do not interrupt or otherwise derail, harass or attack the person speaking.

- **Be Attentive/Focused:** Sit facing the person directly. Be aware of your body language, keeping it in a relaxed position. Lean your body toward them and maintain eye contact. Shut off distractions. Pay attention to both the speaker's and your non-verbal communications. Create a positive atmosphere through non-verbal behavior.

- If necessary, start with a question to get person to tell their story. Encourage them by saying things like, "Tell me what happened from your perspective," or "How have you been affected?"
  - If the person is overwhelmed with anger or other emotion, sometimes it is necessary to enable the person to engage in a cathartic process (e.g. being allowed to rant, cry, yell, etc) as long as they don't use physical force.
  - Try to understand the feeling the person is expressing, as well as the intellectual content. Most of us have difficulty talking clearly about our feelings, so it is important to pay careful attention.
- **Respond:** Listen patiently to what the other persons has to say, even though you may believe it is wrong or irrelevant.
    - Indicate simple acceptance, not necessarily agreement, by nodding or perhaps injecting an occasional "mm-hmm"
    - Be a sounding board.
- **Restate/Summarize:** Restate the person's feeling briefly, but accurately. At this stage you simply serve as a mirror. Encourage the other person to continue talking.
    - When the other person has finished speaking, summarize in your own words, what you heard the person say for verification. "I heard you say....is that right?" or "Let me review what I've heard you say. Please correct me if I leave anything out." If you haven't gotten it right, the speaker will give you immediate feedback.
- **Clarify:** Elicit more information about the person's perspective by drawing him/her out with clarifying questions, ("Could you tell me more about...?" "I'm interested in learning your thoughts on ....")
    - When the other person touches on a point you want to know more about, simply repeat his/her statement as a questions. With this encouragement he/she will probably expand on his previous statement.
    - Avoid direct questions and arguments about facts. Refrain from saying, "That's not true." You may want to review evidence afterwards, but it is irrelevant to how a person feels now.
- **Reflect Feelings:** You can show that you understand the speaker's point of view without agreeing with them.
    - Try to name the persons feelings without judgment and rephrase in neutral terms, "I hear that you are very frustrated. Is that right?"
    - Don't discount the speaker's feeling with stock phrases, such as "It's not that bad."
    - Don't let the speaker "hook" you by getting you angry, upset , judgmental or argumentative.

## CONCLUSION

After having the opportunity to be truly listened to without interruption, evaluation and judgment, many people feel encouraged and empowered. People probably heard things that they hadn't heard before which broadened their understanding of how the other person saw things. It also may have helped clarify some things in their own mind, while providing some needed emotional release.

During such communication, minds can be opened allowing people to be more receptive to new ideas. In creating a trusting environment, it is hoped that the seeds of communication will have been planted replacing the negative emotions that grew between the people. Hopefully, this will lead to a willingness to develop resolutions leading to a win-win solution to their conflict.