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Empathic Listening by H. Holley Humphrey

Would you like to increase your intimacy skills? Want to know why most listening breaks down? How about being able to really "be there" when a friend is feeling blue? Here are some tips for listening expertise.

What Is Empathic Listening?

Empathic Listening is a mixture of communication skills and awareness to use when you genuinely want to connect. You can use it to applaud someone's victory or to help uncover what's really

troubling her. The result is often a deeper sense of connection, relief, and joy!

Have you ever been really excited about something and felt disappointed with the response you received? For example, you might say,

"Hey, I just paid off my credit card!"

Perhaps a friend offers a flippant reply.

"Big deal, you'll be back in debt in no time."

Or in a misguided attempt to celebrate with you, she might unconsciously divert the subject to herself with,

"Congratulations! I did that two years ago."<

With empathy, however, because the focus stays on the speaker, the enjoyment lasts longer. If your friend's response was,

"Wow, I bet that's a big relief!"

you might feel encouraged to continue.

"Yeah. Sometimes I thought I was drowning in debt."

An empathic listener will stay with you as long as she honestly can until the conversation seems complete.

"Sounds as if you've felt pretty discouraged at times. I imagine you've been wishing for a fresh start?"

You might reply,

"Exactly. I need to be saving money instead of living on the edge."

The listener may confirm,

"I guess what you'd really like is greater financial security?"

"Precisely!"

Can you feel the difference? With the focus consciously on the speaker, both people have a deeper, more meaningful experience. It becomes a mutual exploration. It is done "with" someone not "to" them.

How Can You Listen More Empathically?

Primarily, it's about quality attention. Your heartfelt attitude of acceptance and alertness help the speaker express clearly what she is trying to say. **First**, focus on discovering her unmet needs, **then** present yours. After that, work together to find a solution.

★ Start with the intent to connect. Don't get caught up in "doing it right." It's not about being clever. Sometimes even just connecting silently is plenty. It's your intent that counts.

★ To guess her unexpressed need, ask yourself,

"What might she be feeling? What might she be wanting?"

During pauses in her speaking, help her clarify her feelings and needs (or just her needs) with guessing phrases such as:

1. Seems as if you wish ... ?
2. Were you wanting ... ?
3. Are you hoping... ?

This is a process similar to peeling an onion. Be prepared for feelings, wants, and even the subject to shift at different layers. Don't be dismayed by "No" answers. Simply use that information to hone your next guess.

If you get stuck, try summarizing,

"May I tell you what I've understood so far?"

Or you might say,

"I'm stuck right now. It would really help me to listen better if I knew more about what you are wanting. Can you help me out?"

If you get tired or have other obligations, ask to reschedule, expressing your feelings and needs honestly. Perhaps you can sincerely say,

"I'm a bit frustrated and torn right now because I'd like to hear what you're saying and at the same time I'm distracted by an upcoming appointment. I'd like to wait until I can give you my complete attention because you're important to me. How do you feel about stopping soon and continuing this evening?"

Here's a sample dialog:

"Nobody seems to care about what's happening in the world today!"

"Sounds like you're feeling discouraged?"

"I just hate all the wasteful destruction."

"You'd like a safer world?"

"Yeah. I want people to value education instead of jails."

"Seems as if you wish that people would wake up and change their priorities before it's too late?"

"Exactly!"

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"Would you like to hear how I deal with it?"

Two more suggestions:

1. DON'T TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY.

As listeners, taking criticism personally is our single biggest miscalculation. We all do it. The biggest listening secret is that when people seem to be complaining they are really poorly expressing their own feelings and needs.

"You're so incompetent"

might be more accurately expressed as

"I'm so exasperated. I wish I could explain things so clearly, that you could do them perfectly the first time."

If, however, you do hear such a "you statement," try something like,

"Sounds like you're annoyed. Were you wanting something done differently?"

If you hear,

"You never listen to me,"

instead of reacting you could try,

"Would you like some full attention right now?"

That speaker might have meant,

"I'm frustrated. I'd really prefer to be totally listened to right now. Would you be willing to let the machine answer calls while we're talking?"

Again, to receive criticism empathically listen for the unspoken need. In hearing it as that person's need, you'll be less tempted to defend yourself and more available to connect.

2. DON'T GRAB THE SPOTLIGHT.

When we agree silently or verbally to be a listener, it's a serious agreement. We are being entrusted with someone's vulnerability. Often, however, right in the middle of listening, we get an overwhelming temptation to interrupt. Inadvertently we're asking the speaker to focus on us. It seems justified though, because we're convinced the information is valuable and will be very helpful.

10 Obstacles to Empathic Listening

1. Give Advice / Fix-it

"I think you should ... "

"If I were you, I'd ... "

"There's a great book about ... "

2. Explain It Away

"I would have called but ... "

"She only said that 'cuz you ... "

"But I didn't mean to ... "

3. Correct It

"That's not how it happened ... "

"But you're the one who ... "

"Wait! I never said that!"

4. Console

"It wasn't your fault ... "
"You did the best you could ... "
"It could've been a lot worse ... "

5. Tell a Story

"That reminds me of the time ... "
"I know how you feel. That happened to me too when I ... "

6. Shut Down Feelings

"Cheer up. Don't be so mad."
"Quit feeling sorry for yourself."

7. Sympathize / Commiserate

"Oh you poor thing ... "
"How can people do that?"

8. Investigate / Interrogate

"When did this happen?"
"How come you did that?"
"Why didn't you call?"

9. Evaluate / Educate

"You're just too unrealistic."
"The trouble with them is ... "
"What is this telling you?"
"If you weren't so defensive ... "

10. One-Up

"That's nothing. Listen to this!"

Timing Is Everything!

These temptations are actually "premature" attempts to connect because they usually come with nurturing intentions. They're not "wrong" but the timing is poor if the speaker is still uncovering her deeper need. Listen for responses such as

"Exactly!"

or

"That's right!"

Try using your intuition about timing or ask if the speaker is ready to listen

★ **"Do you have a sense that I've really heard you or is there something else you'd like me to understand?"**

★ **"I'm moved by what you've said. Would you like to hear my feelings about it?"**

★ **"I'm curious about this. May I ask you a couple of questions?"**

★ **"I have a suggestion. Would you like to hear it now or would you prefer to continue?"**

★ **"I have a story that's similar and might be useful. Would you enjoy hearing it?"**

★ "I'm remembering it a little differently. Would you be willing to hear my version?"

★ "Given the situation, would you like to brainstorm some solutions together?"

Empathic listening is a combination of

1. Having the intention to connect.
 2. Focusing on clarifying the speaker's needs first.
 3. Remembering that criticism is someone's poorly expressed feelings and unmet needs.
 4. Checking the timing before offering your feelings, suggestions, corrections, etc.
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