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360-468-4446
admin@lihhs.org
178 Weeks Road
PO Box 747
Lopez Island WA
98261

www.lihhs.org

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The Art of Active Listening

By Elizabeth Landrum, Ph.D.

“While I may bring skills and years of experience to the task, ultimately I am simply present, offering help and wanting to learn.” — Dr. Ira Byock

Can you recall a time when someone was truly interested and engaged with everything you were saying, made you feel like you were the most important person in that moment, maybe even helped you explore more deeply how you thought or felt by their questions and interest? Perhaps you have experienced the power of transformative communication through deep listening.

Although we may think we are paying attention to what someone is saying, we are often so focused on our own opinions, experiences, and agendas that we aren't truly listening. And because we think three to four times faster than we talk, we tend to get impatient, let our minds wander, and find ourselves in other territories, sometimes off-topic, often considering our own opinions or what we want to say next. In this world of sound bites, dramatic attention-grabbers and speedy messaging, meaningful connections are often lost. It has become harder to listen patiently, to pay attention to verbal and non-verbal subtleties, and even to attend to another with sincere interest and curiosity.

Research has shown that we retain less than half of what is being communicated in normal conversation. What we hear is inevitably filtered through our personal values, beliefs, biases, intentions and expectations. We continually miss information, misunderstand and misinterpret without checking back to clarify.

Listening deeply with openness and empathy is simple, but not easy. It is a skill that can be acquired and developed — an active process in which a conscious decision is made to concentrate on what is being communicated, to absorb the complete messages (not just the words) being spoken, and to respond to those messages in a way that helps the speaker feel heard. Patience and the practice of a few skills are what's needed to become better listeners.

The benefits of active listening include the building of trust and pathways for solving problems or resolving conflicts. Listening well is the foundation of any effective communication, whether in social, organizational or personal situations. As active listeners, we can broaden our perspectives and come to understand another's experience or points of view. The listener becomes more approachable and the speaker more relaxed and open to talk freely. My experience as a therapist has taught me

that since one's beliefs and feelings evolve within a framework of lived experience, they can be understood if we listen deeply enough. I have witnessed how often healing comes out of the felt experience of being heard, valued and validated.

Strategies for active listening:

Give the speaker your **undivided attention**, making eye contact, pushing distractions aside, and communicating (verbally and non-verbally) that you are listening. Pay attention to their body language as well as your own, as most communication happens non-verbally.

Follow their lead without interrupting. Let go of your own desires and preferences.

Be a supportive, non-judgmental presence without offering advice or solutions. Encourage the speaker to trust his/her own wisdom.

Be curious and willing to learn, open to the unknown and unexpected.

Ask open-ended questions, conveying your interest and encouraging them to keep talking.

Tolerate silences. Respecting quiet moments can be a powerful tool for a deep conversation. Silence is trust-building and gives both the speaker and receiver a chance to reflect.

Restate, paraphrase, and reflect to show you understand what the speaker is saying, how they feel, allowing them to “hear” themselves.

Give permission for full expression, while acknowledging the value of what's being conveyed (even when you don't agree). Trust that whatever others say, regardless of how well or poorly it is said, comes from something true in their experience.

Ask clarifying questions to get more information, clear up confusions, resolve misunderstandings and ensure you are receiving the correct message.

Summarize to review, to clarify, and/or to establish a basis for further discussion.

Remember that offering your active, open presence is a valuable gift you can give anyone at any time.