

Importance of Listening

Along with expressing your own feelings and needs clearly, it's important to really listen to and identify the same in others.

Reflective Listening

Reflective listening shows you understand what another person is saying and meaning. It especially involves paraphrasing in your own words and using their 'key words' when they carry emotional charge. This kind of empathic listening can also have a profoundly clarifying effect. As psychologist Carl Rogers put it: 'When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It is astonishing how elements that seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens, how confusions that seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is heard.'

Philosopher Eugene Gendlin describes the steps involved in reflective listening:

"To show that you understand exactly, make a sentence or two that gets at the personal meaning this person wanted to put across. This will usually be in your own words, but use that person's own words for the touchy main things." "People need to hear you speak. They need to hear that you got each step. Make a sentence or two for every main point they make." "Sometimes what people say is complicated. You can't get what they say, nor what it means to them, all at once. First make a sentence or two about the crux of what they said. Check that out with them. Let them correct it or add to it if they want to. Take in, and say back, what they have changed or added, until they have agreed that you have it just as they feel it. Then make another sentence."

Empathic Listening

A key ingredient of empathy is presence; this distinguishes empathy from mental or intellectual understanding or sympathy. "When we are thinking about people's words and listening to how they connect to our theories, we are looking at people - we are not with them". Empathic listening is being "fully present to what the other person is feeling and needing, and not losing that through a fog of diagnosis and interpretation". The listener needs to focus their awareness - and keep it focused - on the other person. This requires a degree of inner stillness in the listener, so that their focus does not switch to themselves whilst they are empathising. This is a matter of being so focused on the feelings of the speaker that our own reactions, preconceived judgements, analysis or interpretations do not intrude.

Rosenberg describes the following analogy to explain the nature of the focus that empathy requires: "Recall a time when you had a pain in your body, perhaps a headache or a toothache, and you became totally engrossed in a book. What happened to the pain? You no longer felt it. You didn't suppress it; rather the focus of your attention was so fully on what you were reading that you

were not aware of the pain. In empathy our attention is so fully focused on the feelings and needs of the other person at that moment that we are not aware of our thoughts about the person."

"The presence that empathy requires is not easy to maintain... Instead of offering empathy, we tend instead to give advice or reassurance and to explain our own position or feeling, [or believe we have to 'fix' situations and make others feel better]. Empathy, on the other hand, requires us to focus full attention on the other person's message. We give to others the time and space they need to express themselves fully and to feel understood. There is a Buddhist saying that aptly describes this ability: 'don't just do something, stand there'."

There are some common behaviours that prevent us from being sufficiently present to connect empathically with others. The following are examples:

Advising: "I think you should ... " "How come you didn't ... ?"
One-upping: "That's nothing; wait'll you hear what happened to me."
Educating: "This could turn into a very positive experience for you if you just ... "
Consoling: "It wasn't your fault; you did the best you could."
Storytelling: "That reminds me of the time ... "
Shutting down: "Cheer up. Don't feel so bad."
Sympathising: "Oh, you poor thing ... "
Interrogating: "When did this begin?"
Explaining: "I would have called but ... "
Correcting: "That's not how it happened."

While we may choose at times to sympathise with others by feeling their feelings, it's helpful to be aware that during the moment we are offering sympathy, we are not empathising.



Deep Empathic Listening for Feelings and Needs

In situations of conflict, people can react with intensity, and their words do not reflect their feelings and needs. You can use the components of NVC to tune in to the feelings and needs of others, "in contrast to either (1) blaming yourself by taking the message personally, or 2) blaming and judging them." Rosenberg describes how empathic listening can help us to uncover what is truly alive in another person:

"In NVC, no matter what words others may use to express themselves, we simply listen for their observations, feelings, needs and requests...If I'm using NVC, I never, never, never hear what someone thinks about me. Never hear what someone thinks about you, you'll live longer. You'll enjoy life more. Hear the truth. The truth is that when somebody's telling you what's wrong with you, the truth is they have a need. Isn't getting met. Hear that they are in pain. Don't hear the analysis."

Here is an example of Rosenberg putting empathic listening into practice to uncover the needs underneath what people say:

"I was working in a refugee camp in a country not very pleased with the United States. There were about 170 people assembled, and when my interpreter announced that I was an American citizen, one of them jumped up and screamed at me, "Murderer"! Another one jumped up and shouted: "Child killer!" Another: "Assassin!" I was glad I knew NVC that day. It enabled me to see the beauty behind their messages, to see what was alive in them.

We do that in NVC by hearing feelings and needs behind any message. So I said to the first gentleman, "Are you feeling angry because your need for support isn't getting met by my country?" Now, that required me to try to sense what he was feeling and needing. I could have been wrong. But even if we are wrong, when a person trusts that we're sincerely... trying to connect with their feelings and needs in that moment, that shows the other person that no matter how they communicate with us, we care about what's alive in them. When a person trusts that, we're well on our way to making a connection in which everybody's needs can get met.

It didn't happen right away because this man was in a lot of pain. And it happened that I guessed right, because he said: "You're #!@&%! right!" adding: "We don't have sewage systems. We don't have housing. Why are you sending your weapons?"

I said: "So, sir, if I'm hearing you again, you're saying that it's very painful when you need things like sewage systems and housing - and when weapons are sent instead, it's very painful."

He said "You're #!@&%! right! Do you know what it's like to live under these conditions for 28 years?"

"So, sir, you're saying that it's very painful, and you need some understanding for the conditions that you're living under." So I heard what was alive in the guy, not that he thought I was a murderer. When he trusted that I sincerely cared about what he was feeling and needing, he could start to hear me.

Then I said, "Look, I'm frustrated right now because I came a long way to be here. I want to offer something and I'm worried now that because you've got me labeled as an American, you aren't going to listen to me."

He said, "What do you want to say to us?" So he could hear me then. But I had to see behind the human being behind the names he was calling me."

Once we have heard the feelings and needs of the person we are communicating with, they are much more able to listen to what we have to say.
