EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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ACTIVE COMMUNICATION REQUIRES ONE PERSON TO TALK AND THE OTHER TO LISTEN ... AND BOTH TO DO THEIR PARTS WELL

Listening is the other half of communication. Our first thought, when we think about communication, may be to consider the speaker's ability to convey ideas effectively. What we often forget is that without a listener the speaker may as well be talking to the wind. Just as effective speaking is an acquired skill, so is good listening. Some do it better than others. But all of us can learn to enrich our own listening skills.

Think about what happens when you hear someone speak. You pay attention to the person's appearance, to activity in the background, to what you did earlier in the day, to a conversation you had with someone else, or to your counterargument, and how you will present it. Your mind flits from topic to topic as you take in only fragments of what the other person says. It seems a wonder that people understand each other as well as they do. The speaker conveys only a portion of the real meaning of an intended idea – and the listener may pick up on only a fraction of the information transmitted. We think we know what the speaker was trying to say, but often we are absolutely wrong. (Have you ever played the "rumor game" in a large circle? The first person whispers a message to the next in line, and this message goes from person to person until it gets to the end of the circle. Something like "two kittens were playing with a ball of string" easily mutates into "the lion sleeps tonight" as the message is relayed around the circle.)

Listening is itself a form of communication. Listening to another person sends the message that you care and that you are truly interested in the other person's ideas. Without the ability to listen effectively, true intimacy and mutual respect between

Koy Roberts, Ph.D.
Family Psychologist

413 W. Bethel Road, Suite 202
Coppell, Texas 75019

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partners, two of the hallmarks of a successful relationship, are not even possible. When you fail to listen to your partner, you may impart the message that he or she doesn't count, that you are the one with all the knowledge, and that you lack respect for your partner. These are hardly the qualities of a thriving and mutually beneficial relationship. Effective listening means that you want to learn from, enjoy, care about, trust, understand, and nurture your partner. A good listener sends the message that he or she is interested in the world and to new ideas and life experiences. To listen well is one way to show that you can love well.

Learn to Listen Effectively

The first step in mastering good listening skills is to become aware of why listening is important in your life and your relationships. And the next step is simply to start doing it. Practice active listening whenever you can.

Here are a few rules to start the process:

- Never interrupt when the other person is speaking. Allow the speaker to complete his or her thought.
- Eliminate distractions – put your book down or turn off the television.
- Maintain eye contact while the other person is speaking.
- Pull your chair closer and lean toward the speaker.
- Keep your posture open – directly face your partner and leave your arms and legs uncrossed.
- Give verbal and nonverbal responses to what the speaker is saying – "yes, I see," nod your head, smile, or frown when it's appropriate.

Listening is more than passively remaining silent while the other person talks. It is the other half of an active collaborative process. The first level is attentive listening. In this mode we take the position that we are genuinely interested in the other person's point of view. We accept the fact that we have something to learn from the interaction. However, this level of listening has its limitations. Even though we are attentive, we still make assumptions about the message and we tend to fill in the gaps with whatever it is that we want to hear. At this level we don't check to see if what we have heard is what the speaker really meant to say.

The second, and more powerful, level is active listening (or reflective listening). This assumes that communication is truly a two-way process that involves giving feedback. Active listening requires that the listener paraphrase, clarify, and give feedback.

- ***Paraphrasing*** is the most important element of active listening. When your partner says something of interest, you should restate in your own words what you heard your partner say. You can provide a lead-in, such as "What I'm hearing you say is that..." or "So if I'm correct, you are telling me that..." Paraphrasing allows us to correct misconceptions as they occur, gives us the chance to resist obstacles to good listening, keeps both you and your partner from becoming defensive or feeling misunderstood, and helps us to remember what was said.

- ***Clarifying*** provides more depth to the listening process than merely paraphrasing. Your purpose in clarifying is to ask questions about what the speaker is saying in a helpful and empathic way. "So how did you feel when I cut you off?" "What did you think when I said I didn't want to take that trip?" Clarifying does not involve belittling, manipulating or coercing your partner in any way. Its purpose is to tell the speaker that you are engaged in listening and want to know more about specific points.

- ***Giving feedback*** involves providing your personal thoughts on what your partner has said, without succumbing to the obstacles to good listening. You calmly state your own opinions, thoughts and feelings. This gives your partner yet another chance to see if you got the message and to check out the accuracy of his or her communication. And perhaps your partner can gain a new or broader perspective on what was talked about.

Listening is a skill most of us never learned as a school subject. We assume that listening is something that comes naturally. Too often we listen for what we need to hear rather than to what the other person truly intends to say. Our inability to listen is often at the root of our interpersonal conflicts. Good relationships are characterized by good listening skills on the part of both partners. When we listen well to someone we not only show that person respect and care, but we show that we are open to the world around us.

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Obstacles to Good Listening

Real listening is a skill that takes practice and an honest look into how you deal with the world. If you tend to take

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a distrustful or combative stance toward other people most of the time, it may be hard to engage in healthy and open listening. The same holds true if you need to please others or form dependent relationships with other people much of the time – it becomes hard to truly hear what they are trying to say...and you will hear only what you need to hear.

If you take a distrustful or combative stance toward other people, it may be hard to engage in healthy and open listening.

Take a look at some of the common obstacles to active listening that typically interfere with healthy communication. Learn to recognize them when they are happening. And remember that obstacles can usually be removed.

Being Judgmental: When you have already made a negative judgment about someone, you will stop listening openly to what they have to say. You may listen only to gather evidence that supports your negative opinion of the other person. Unfortunately, if you are not able to listen to the totality of what the person is saying, you will stay locked into your negative opinion.

Rehearsing: Your mind actively creates your argument against the speaker's point of view as it is being presented. This implies that you have your own established opinions and that you are closed to what the other has to say.

Filtering: You will hear some things that the other person talks about, but not everything. There may be some topics, like the speaker's anger toward you, which you simply block out because you aren't as ready to deal with them as the other person might be. Filtering may be helpful when it is used to lessen the impact of bringing up an avoided topic, but continuing it for long usually means that it is best to examine the meaning behind your need to shut out some of the information.

Advising: Sometimes people just need to be heard. We don't have to fix every problem the other person talks about. Giving advice instead of just listening may make us feel needed, or it may be a way of distancing ourselves from hearing the other's true feelings. To tell someone else how they should feel or behave can be a way of belittling them or telling them that they are not to be trusted. Unless advice is asked for, it may be best not to give it.

Mind Reading: You may disregard what your partner is saying and try to figure out what he or she is really trying to say. You are acting like an expert on your partner's feelings, but this deprives your partner of the ability to communicate freely and with candor – and for you to understand your partner's stated point of view.

Pleasing: You are so concerned about being nice, keeping the peace, and placating that you'll jump in to agree just to keep everything happy and smooth. It may be helpful to look into why you feel compelled to do this and what it might mean for your relationship. Again, the desire to please prevents you from hearing what your partner really needs to say.

Deflecting: Whenever a certain topic is brought up that you feel uncomfortable with, you redirect the conversation to something else. You'll tell a joke or change the subject, even if the topic is of genuine concern to your partner.

A Listening Exercise for Couples

Reciprocal listening is a powerful tool for couples who need to improve their communication. Couples who try this may become aware of how limited their communication has been in the past. They also learn an effective technique, which can increase the respect, trust, and intimacy of their relationship. This exercise may seem structured and perhaps contrived at first, but stay with it. The rewards can be immense.

The couple decides on a minor disagreement that they need to talk about. Each partner takes turns being either the speaker or the listener. The speaker has five minutes to speak without interruption. As speaker, talk about the problem as you see it. Present your argument briefly and stick to the point. Be sure to use "I statements" to present your views and don't place the blame on your partner (that is, just talk about how you feel about the conflict without putting your partner in a defensive position). After five minutes your partner (the listener) will verbally summarize what he or she has heard. This allows the speaker to let the listener know if anything has been left out or if it has been misinterpreted. Keep going until the speaker feels that the point has been completely heard.

As the listener, pay close attention to what is being said and try to attune yourself to your partner's needs. When you summarize what your partner has said, make sure you don't disagree, argue, or criticize. Just repeat what you have heard.

Now switch positions. The speaker becomes the listener and the listener, the speaker. Follow the same procedures until the new speaker feels satisfied that his or her position has been understood. It is important to avoid letting this exercise turn into an argument. Because this is such a powerful way of learning to listen and to communicate better, many people prefer to try it with a therapist present, at least for the first few attempts.

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LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN

Children need to be heard. Listening to children gives them the feeling that they count, that they matter. They can draw on the strength and experience of an adult whom they trust – and they trust those who give them stable and consistent attention. It is during childhood that they develop a level of self-esteem that may follow them throughout their lives, and the child who has been listened to is much more likely to develop a positive self-image than one who has not been heard.

One of the best gifts an adult can provide a child is showing the child how to use active listening skills. Adults can model good listening techniques for children and advise them on ways to listen better by picking out the highlights of a conversation and asking relevant questions.

Use the following listening techniques in dealing with the special needs of children:

Pay special attention as they talk. Maintain good eye contact and forget about the telephone and television. Children can tell by the adult's reply whether or not they have the adult's attention.

Know when to, and when not to, use active listening. Use active listening when you are free enough of your own problems to show the empathy and acceptance a child needs. Use it when you are in the mood and have the time. Listening should not be a way to change the child's behavior. Pay attention to the child's mood too, and make sure the time is right for the child to talk. Sometimes a child just wants to play or to be left alone.

Listen with patience. A child has a more limited vocabulary and often takes longer to express ideas. Listen as if you had plenty of time. We may feel that we know better and cut the child off – but it is far more beneficial to let the child express a thought freely at his or her own pace.

Children sometimes need encouragement to talk. Children haven't had much experience in the art of conversation, so we sometimes have to ask questions. When a child feels an adult is attentive, the child will be more willing to open up.

Listen to the child's nonverbal messages. Children communicate not only through words, but also through their body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, energy levels, or changes in behavior. Pay attention to these cues and respond in the way that is best for the child.

Koy Roberts, Ph.D.
413 W. Bethel Road, Suite 202
Coppell, Texas 75019