

How to Really Lovingly Listen to Anyone at Anytime

Lisa Cypers Kamen, MA

"Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person,
they are almost indistinguishable."

David Augsburger

In the 1960's, the late author, therapist and educator, Dr. Carl Rogers, transformed the world of communication with his principles of "active listening," "empathic listening," and "unconditional regard." Rogers revolutionized the ways in which therapists worked with their clients, and the ways in which clients would see themselves in the therapeutic relationship. These three amazing principles are still in use today by therapists the world over (known as Rogerian or Humanistic therapists) and they continue to empower people to live a more positive life that is firmly rooted in the present.

There is no doubt that most often people communicate in order to have their opinions, ideas, and feelings heard by another. However, how often are we actually listening to that other person? All too often it is so important to get our point(s) across; we forget there's another person in the conversation. In fact, listening is one of the most important skills we will ever develop. We need to listen not only to others, but also ourselves. Of course, sounds are around us all the time – the roar of the wind on a blustery windy day, the hum of our computers as we work, our co-workers chatting around us, music from the iPod, and the call of people and animals everywhere. Are we truly listening, or do we live on autopilot?

One of the keys to being a more effective listener is to be present. That may sound unusual because most people will likely say that of course they're

present. But, I mean emotionally present. It is about opening ourselves up to another person, truly listening to what others have to say. This means we're not thinking about our next response, or the discussion we had with a co-worker, but we're completely present and in the moment.

Another helpful tip is to remember the context and sub-texts for our conversations with others. The person may be in a difficult situation, financially challenging times, or experienced a recent loss. The ten BIG ideas below will open up a world of effective listening skills to learn and practice.

"The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand
and be understood. The best way to understand
people is to listen to them."

Ralph G. Nichols

Here are 10 BIG ideas to help you Become a Better Listener:

1. **The 5 Dynamic Principles of Active Listening:** If you've never heard of active listening, now is the time. Active listening is a wonderful way of becoming more attuned to the people around you. The five main principles of active listening are:
 - Pay attention
 - Defer judgment
 - Respond appropriately
 - Provide feedback
 - Demonstrate you're listening

Pay attention refers to all aspects of the person(s) present. That means their facial expressions, body language, plus their tone of voice, as well as the words. Remember to allow the person to keep speaking until

they're finished, and don't interrupt with counter-arguments. When responding, be honest and assert your opinions, but in a respectful tone. Trust the other person in a way that you think they would want to be treated.

Another technique includes reflecting back by saying something like:

- "It sounds like ... "
- "What I hear you saying is ..."

It's okay to ask questions, especially to clarify. So use something like "When you said ... did you mean ...?" The goal is to truly hear what the other person is saying (or trying to say). Ultimately, active listening can help us to be better communicators.

2. **Feedback is a Gift of Good Listening:** As noted above, the ability to give feedback is one of the hallmarks of active (and effective) listening. How often do we find ourselves simply saying the first thing that's on our minds, or reacting out of fear, anger, or frustration? The ability to give good feedback is a skill people can learn. It takes time and practice, but it is so rewarding once someone masters the skill.

Here are some practical guidelines to begin:

- Offer "conscious" and "constructive" feedback
- Be descriptive rather than interpretive
- Be specific; do not generalize
- Enable the person to do something with the information
- Watch your body language – as you give feedback your words, movements, and expressions must all match
- Manage your own emotions – stay open, non-defensive, and allow yourself to be vulnerable

- Use a kind but neutral tone of voice
 - Ask the person about their experience with your feedback – be open to change and growth
 - Carefully consider what you might do or say differently next time
3. **Everybody Experiences Communication Roadblocks:** We all have these stumbling blocks in life – the roadblocks to good communication with others. So, why do these happen? Here are some of the most common roadblocks to effective communication:
- Making assumptions
 - Making judgments
 - Giving unwarranted advice
 - Trying to provide solutions
 - Persuasion through logic
 - Over analyzing
 - Over sympathizing
 - Over reacting

The fact is most people experience these roadblocks at some time or another. The key to overcoming them is to practice active and empathic listening. This will empower you to learn the skills that will hopefully avoid these blocks in the future.

4. **Over-reaction is a Communication Killer:** It is human nature and extremely common to over-react. Most of us do at some point or another. However, there are reasons for why we over-react, and the primary reason is we've been triggered emotionally. Sometimes it is difficult not to react when a person says something startling and become defensive, bitter, or angry. Often it is difficult to keep our calm and respond with understanding. As Stephen R. Covey said, most

people listen with the intent to respond. That means while the other person is speaking, we're framing our response in our mind. This is often the path to over-reacting (and over-thinking). If we're busy framing our response, how can we be fully listening at the same time? The fact is we can't. Another aspect of over-reacting is fear. We are often fearful of what someone is going to say to us or about us. Therefore, instead of actually discussing the situation, we start to defend ourselves, even if we haven't been attacked, because we perceive that we have been. The path to letting go of the tendency to over-react is to be fully present, and fully listen.

5. **A Golden Pathway to Stronger Relationships = Empathic Listening:**

Empathic listening is another way to avoid communication roadblocks and over-reacting. Empathy for another person is a wonderful way of opening ourselves up to the feelings, experiences, and perceptions of another. There is the old adage of "you never know someone until you've walked in their shoes." In a way, this is some of what empathic listening is about. Empathic listening is the ability to put aside our own agendas within the situation of another and begin to understand the way others feel.

The listener conveys their ability to empathize with the speaker through their words and body language. There is an encouragement to the speaker to fully express 'their truth' free of any interruptions, criticisms, or judgments. When the listener is able to do this, they silently speak a powerful message. They let the speaker know they understand them. Some of the guidelines for empathic listening are:

- Be attentive
- Be a sounding board
- Don't interrupt

- Don't change the subject or try to move the speaker in any specific direction
- Don't give advice – merely listen
- Encourage the speaker – "I'd like to hear more."

"The word "listen" contains the same letters
as the word "silent.""

Alfred Brendel

6. **Empathic Listening Transforms HOW We Communicate:** To become an empathic listener is to truly transform our way of communicating with others. It means that we commit to communicating with people on a much more open level, fully taking in what they have to say and share, rather than assuming and making judgments. These conversations will be much deeper, more honest, and full of the emotional depth that truly enables one to communicate with another. It will greatly reduce stress because there will be honest communications rather than more surface-like communications which many people tend to indulge in.

With empathic listening, some of the benefits will include:

- The speaker will be fully acknowledged
- The speaker's self-esteem and confidence are increased
- The speaker and listener are more likely to be cooperative
- Stress and tension are reduced
- The speaker and listener gain each other's trust
- There is a greater openness between speaker and listener
- There is a greater sharing of ideas and thoughts
- The speaker and listener learn more valid information
- In a work situation, there is more effective teamwork

7. **Experiencing Unconditional Regard for Others Leads to Acceptance of Others:** The maverick of Rogerian counseling, Dr. Carl Rogers, pioneered many important principles. One of these is unconditional regard. This is primarily a counseling technique, but it also works well in inter-personal communications. Rogers' work was known as client-centered counseling, and Rogers himself was considered a humanist. Rogers believed that it was essential for therapists to show unconditional positive regard (UPR) to their clients. He also suggested that individuals who don't have this type of acceptance from people in their life can eventually come to hold negative beliefs about themselves.

Unconditional positive regard therefore means valuing the person as doing their best to move forward in their lives constructively and respecting the person's right to self-determination no matter what they choose to do. That doesn't mean that you need to like the person or approve of what they do. Nor does it mean that you have to simply put up with what they do if you see it as dangerous in some way. UPR can be misunderstood as being nice to people, smiling at them and nodding. But it's not about what you do. UPR is an attitude. Get the attitude and the behavior that expresses that attitude will follow.

8. **Empathic Listening Bestows an Unexpected Gift = Self-Love.** There is a very famous saying that most people seem to have heard: "If you can't love yourself then you can't love another." The reason empathic listening is important to our relationships is because, first and foremost, it encourages us to develop a more positive relationship with ourselves. Empathic listening isn't only about listening to others; it's also about listening to ourselves – the way we speak to ourselves, the way we treat ourselves, that internal dialogue constantly nattering at us. If we

can begin to shut down the nattering and fully listen to our own heart, then we begin the process of understanding ourselves more fully. There is no one we need to have an honest dialogue with more than ourselves.

The way we speak to ourselves, the words we use, the phrases that go through our minds are essential in understanding the relationship we have with ourselves and our sense of self-esteem. The great Jewish philosopher Hillel once said, "The Torah (Old Testament) can be summed up in one line: Treat others as you yourself would wish to be treated and all the rest is commentary." If we reflect on those words, then we understand a valuable principle. We would never talk to someone else the way we talk to ourselves. We wouldn't think of it. So, if we can begin to empathize with ourselves, then we can begin to empathize with others.

9. **Empathy not Sympathy:** Empathy is the ability to mutually *experience* the thoughts, emotions, and direct experience of others. It goes beyond sympathy, which is a feeling of care and understanding for the suffering of others. Sympathy and empathy are both acts of feeling; but with sympathy, you feel for the person; you're sorry for them or pity them, but you don't specifically understand *what* they're feeling.

Sometimes we're left with little choice but to feel sympathetic because we really can't understand the plight or predicament of someone else. It takes imagination, work, or possibly a similar experience to get to empathy.

Empathy can best be described as feeling with the person. Notice the distinction between "for" and "with." To an extent, you are placing

yourself in that person's place, have a good sense of what they feel, and understand their feelings to a degree. For example, sympathy expressed to a person in grief suggests that person is alone in their grief. Empathy suggests you're in it with them, you can imagine what it is to be in their shoes, and you are together with them in emotional turmoil and loss.

10. **Listen and Soften Your Heart:** In a very practical and meaningful way, effective listening is about softening our hearts. Sometimes our lives, which move so very quickly in this modern world, get very caught up in our responsibilities and our duties. It is often difficult to take time out for ourselves and truly care for ourselves. This makes it difficult to do the same for others. But, if we practice active and/or empathic listening, we begin to open the channels of open, honest, meaningful, and mutually respectful communications. This softens our heart as we understand how others feel, how they're coping, what they're experiencing, and their perceptions of their own life. When we let go and cease to judge or assume, we realize that so many people have their own challenges – health, relationships, financial, employment, etc. To fully listen to another person is to allow ourselves to open our hearts and let those feelings sink in. Although it is temporary, we also allow ourselves to feel that person's situation – their joys and their pain. When we soften our hearts, we become happier and gentler inside. Not only do we have compassion for others, but for ourselves as well.

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

Leo Buscaglia

A WORKSHEET TO DEVELOP BETTER LISTENING SKILLS:

1. Name 2-3 roadblocks to your existing communication style and how active listening could be helpful:

2. How do you handle communication that is difficult, sad and happy?

3. List 3 personal benefits to developing the technique of active listening:

4. Describe your body language and attitude when you listen to others:

5. How do you perceive empathic listening being related to self-love?

6. In what way would active and/or empathic listening help to transform your communications?

7. How is empathy more beneficial than sympathy?
