



Member Care:

Listening Skills

Working with Jesus

iFOLLOW

The iFollow Discipleship Series



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

Curriculum Development: The iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition curriculum development was lead by the **Center for Creative Ministry**. **General Editor:** Monte Sahlin; **Assistant Editor:** Debbonnaire Kovacs; **Directional Advisory:** Brad Forbes, Carole Kilcher, Ceri Myers, Cesar Gonzalez, Clayton Kinney, Curtis Rittenour, Dave Osborne, Dave VanDenburgh, Gerry Chudleigh, Jane Thayer, Jerry Thomas, John Appel, Jose Rojas, Kim Johnson, Nicole Chao, Paul Richardson, Rich DuBose, Shasta Nelson, William Sutton; **Pastoral Advisory:** Claudio Consuegra, Collette Pekar, Dave Hutman, Don Driver, Fredrick Russell, Jerry Nelson, Jesse Wilson, Leslie Bumgardner, Loren Fenton, Rebecca Brillhart; **Unit Authors:** Alberto Valenzuela, Althea Pineda, Corienne Hay, Debbonnaire Kovacs, Ed Dickerson, Gianluca Bruno, Gil Bahnsen, Greg Nelson, Jack Calkins, James Whibberding, Karen Collum, Monte Sahlin, Norma Sahlin, Pam Splawinski, Patty Ntihuka, Reinder Bruinsma, Ryan Bell; **Additional contribution** by Maria Ovando-Gibson; **Additional editing:** Dave Gemmell, Meredith Carter; **Graphic Design:** Mind Over Media; **Layout:** Paul D. Young; **Web Development:** Narrow Gate Media.

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iFOLLOW

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Member Care: Listening Skills

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the progression from hearing to understanding and empathy
2. Learn the attitudes and postures that help the speaker feel heard
3. Learn how to obtain clarification without sounding like a parrot
4. Learn some things **never** to say

Content Outline

- A. Why listening skills are important
- B. Hearing, listening and giving heed
- C. Some Bible examples
- D. Misinterpretations
- E. Postures and practices of listening
- F. Hearing with the heart
- G. Import versus impact
- H. Paying attention & clarifying
- I. Being heard
- J. Summary

Background Material for the Presenter

Why do we need to learn to listen? We've been hearing since before we left our mother's womb, and we haven't stopped yet, in this noisy world of ours. Well, for one thing, "hearing" and "listening" are not exactly the same thing, not to mention learning and understanding. If it were that simple, would we have so many misunderstandings and communication breakdowns?

The sign at the front of the room said "Yes, but are you



sure that what you think I meant by what I said is the same thing I think I meant by it?”

The speaker told of two sisters who were arguing, sister “A” sticking adamantly to her original statement. Sister “B” sticking just as adamantly to her original concept, but rewording and expanding in an effort to get her point across. When sister “B” said, “Oh, so you finally agree with me!” Sister “A” responded, “No, that’s just what I’ve been trying to tell you for the last 20 minutes!”

It’s quite possible that no two people have ever spoken the exact same language since the Tower of Babel, even if they both speak Spanish, Russian, English, or whatever. Sometimes even siblings who grew up listening to the same parents, interpret their words differently.

Ever spend half an hour talking back and forth with your spouse/sibling/friend while feeling that you aren’t even in the same conversation? Ever give your teenager a short list of chores to do while you’re at work, only to come home to, “When did you tell me that? I never heard you!” Ever lock horns with a co-worker over miss-fired communication? We all have misunderstandings from time to time, but there are ways we can minimize the frequency and severity of these incidents.

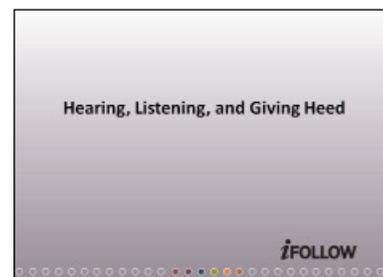
Hearing, Listening, and Giving Heed

There are many references in the Bible to hearing, hearkening (an old English word for listening in the KJV) and paying heed. We will look at some of these texts, but first a bit about the words themselves.

There is a natural progression from merely being aware of sound to experiencing a life (or relationship) change because of what is learned through auditory reception. Different words or phrases depict these nuances, with some overlap.

Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defines “hear” as “To perceive by the ear.” The definition goes on to include “listen, heed, attend,” even “learn,” but “hear,” in and of its self, remains a fairly passive word. Linda Eve Diamond, in her book, *Rule #1: Stop Talking*, agrees that “hearing simply means your ears work.” You can watch television or read a book and still hear others in the room talking, but you have to pay attention if you want to know what they are talking about.

Webster defines “listen” as “to pay attention to sound.” “Heed” pops up, but nothing in the word “listen” requires overt reaction, just a focus on what’s said. “Heed,” on the other hand, (while embodying “pay attention to”) moves on to “concerning yourself with.”



This is the kind of listening that ministry calls for. It isn't actually ministry at all (just passing the time of day with someone) if you aren't willing to concern yourself with what he or she is saying and how he or she feels about it. This is not to say that a little "small talk" isn't useful while getting acquainted with someone, but you need to go on from there to engage in real ministry.

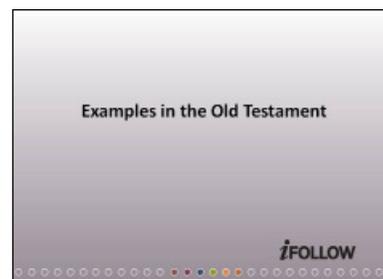
Interestingly enough, these progressions are also present in the original languages of the Bible. Using Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, we find that the Hebrew **anah** means "to hear" but also has elements of attention, and even sometimes, "to answer."

Qashab is "to prick up the ears; attend to" and **azan** is to "broaden out the ears." **Shama** is to "hear intelligently; listen attentively, often with implications of obedience" or behavior. **Shamar** goes a step further by saying "hedge about, guard, protect." Oh that we all listened to God's words in a way that hedges us about with His protection!

In Greek, the word **akroates** which means "merely hear" and does not go on to listen or pay attention, as do the parallel English and Hebrew words. It is used only four times in the Bible. **Akouo** is "to hear, in various forms" and **eisakouo** has also, as in English, both "hear" and "listen." **Skopeo** means "to take aim at, consider, regard, retain." **Epecho** is parallel but also means "to hold, retain." **Horao**, notes Strong, is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for "experience," which is the kind of hearing we are interested in learning. **Hupakouo** means "listen" in the sense of "conform to the voice of authority."

Examples in the Old Testament

Samuel says, "What, then, is this ... lowing of the oxen that I hear (**anah**)?" (1 Samuel 15:14) This is a sound he was surprised to hear, not actively listening for. Job says (3:18) the dead don't hear (**anah**), and we know, of course, that they are not even aware of sound. David prays, "Hear (**anah**) my prayer, O Lord." (Psalm 143:1) The context indicates he clearly means "pay attention to." All of these meanings are correct for **anah**.



Psalm 10:17 states that the Lord hears (**qashab**) the prayer of the humble. Certainly He focuses His attention and intelligence on the problems the meek bring to Him.

Daniel implores God, "Listen to the prayer of Your servant ... for Your sake, O Lord ... incline Your ear and hear ... listen and take action." (Dan. 9:17-19, NASB) The word Daniel uses here is **shama**. Daniel wants God's full attention and he wants God to respond to what He hears.

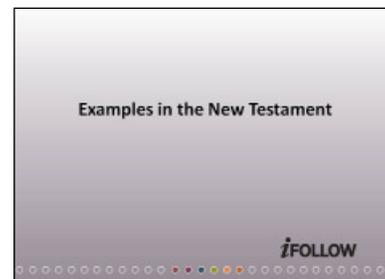
The Israelites are admonished in Dt. 12:28 to be careful to listen (**shama**) to God's words, so that it might go well with them. Good counsel for us, too. Solomon, in 1 Kings 8:30, asks God to pay attention and act in his prayer for the people, when he dedicated the

temple.

God asks us to give this same careful, responsive attention when He pleads, “Hear (**shama**), you deaf! ... Your ears are open, but none hear.” (Isaiah 42:18, 20) In the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah we find God mourning repeatedly that His people **do not** pay responsive attention to Him, even though He promises, “Your ears will hear a word ... ‘this is the way, walk in it.’” (Isaiah 30:21) He also warns that He will not **shama** to those whose “hands are covered with blood.” Obviously, He hears, but He cannot answer to their satisfaction the prayers of impenitent sinners praying for the wrong things.

Examples in the New Testament

Both Paul (in Romans 2:13) and James (1:22) write that merely hearing (**akroates**) the law or word of God does no one any good, we need to be doers of the word. In Matthew 12:42, Jesus reminds the Pharisees that the Queen of Sheba “came from the ends of the earth to hear (**akouo**) the wisdom of Solomon,” adding that Someone “greater than Solomon is here.”



In Luke 1:13, an angel tells Zacharias that God has listened (**eisakouo**) to his prayers and he will have a son. In Acts 16:14-15, Lydia listened intently to the gospel and accepted it. In Mark 8:15, Jesus tells His disciples to take heed (**horao**) to beware the leaven of the Pharisees. Matthew tells us (8:27) that the winds and waves heard and conformed (**hupakouo**) to Christ's voice of authority and Mark uses the same word when talking about unclean spirits (1:27).

Jesus explains “I speak to them in parables, because ... while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says. ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; ... for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear ... otherwise ... they would ... hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and [act], and I would heal them.’” (Matthew 13:13-15, NASB) In other words, the people hear but do not pay attention and understand.

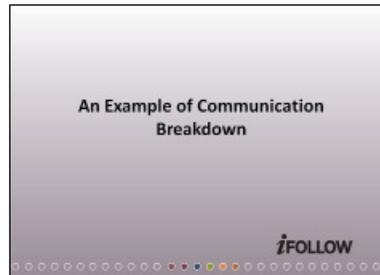
Although it is true that in some translations, and some other places in the Bible where God mourns over His “deaf and blind” children, it almost sounds as if some people (the elect few) are supposed to understand and some (the majority) are not; please don't isolate these passages from the rest of Scripture. Jesus assures us in John 6:39-40 that it is the will of the Father that **all** people would come to the Son, believe in Him and receive eternal life. Peter echoes that God is not willing that any be lost. (2 Peter 3:9) We do know that though He wills salvation for all, not all will be saved because He won't force anyone. In this evil world even God doesn't get everything He wants. Paul agrees that “God our Savior ... desires all ... to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4) Human parents may have ambivalent emotions regarding their children and

changing actions toward them, but our God changes not. (Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8) He still wants all of us, and joyously adopts each one He can coax into accepting. It was with heartbreak in His voice that Jesus admitted some would hear, but not turn and be healed.

So we may conclude that **hearing** is usually fairly passive, **listening** means you are consciously paying attention and sometimes even assumes you are also trying to learn and understand. If you act upon what you hear, you are actually **heeding**, but that term is an archaic English form seldom used these days. “Responding” works just as well. And if you care, you do learn and respond, even if you are not able—or do not think it wise—to respond in the time frame and in just the way the speaker desires.

An Example of Communication Breakdown

Here is an example of why you need to learn how to get clarification from the person who listen to, and should be able to do so easily and naturally, without guilt feelings or the unnaturalness of “technical” language.



Drs. Susan and Peter Glaser tell of a communication retreat they conducted in Alaska. “A conflict broke out between two leaders from different factions of the same group. The interactions were intense as we helped Stella and Don work out some of their most difficult issues. We felt grateful about the way the conversation had ended, until Stella said, ‘Well, I guess we’re back to square one.’

“Don was stunned, shocked and angry. ... He assumed [she] meant, ‘what a waste of time this convention has been. Nothing has been accomplished. We shouldn’t have even had this discussion.’

“With further questioning, we discovered Stella’s intent was really to say, ‘We’re starting with a clean slate. We have the whole world ahead of us now. This is a new beginning for our relationship.’

“The distortion between intent and impact almost shattered an already fragile peace.”
(Glaser and Glaser, pp. 39-40)

Had Dan simply asked, “How so?” or “Do you mean this has all been a waste of time?” the issue would have been quickly resolved without the Glasers needing to interpret.

The Postures and Practice of Listening

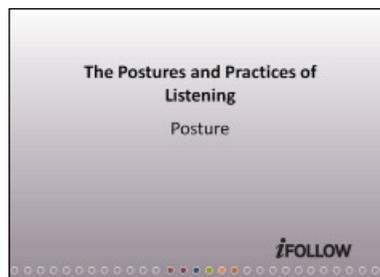
Much of the following information is not needed in everyday social chats. But for the “difficult” things and occasions, when you are involved in caring ministry these understand-

ings are essential.

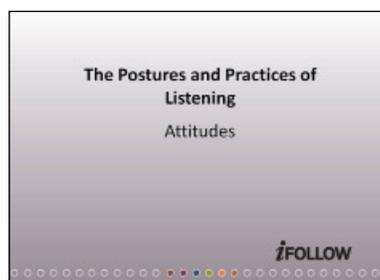
Can you usually tell when someone is actually listening to you or just “letting it flow in one ear and out the other”? Are you sure? You pay attention to the individual’s facial expression, whether or not he or she is looking at you, even his or her posture (whether sitting or standing). You listen for sounds of agreement, doubt or disagreement. But could you be wrong? This is a two-way street. The people who talk to you are also looking to see whether or not you are listening or just letting their words wash over you unheeded.

So learn to look and sound attentive, even if you don’t think what is being said is worth the effort. If the words are not worth it, the **speaker** is! And you might be surprised at what even the youngest or least educated can teach you. Dare to actually listen to those who are different from you in age, race, gender, culture, or background, and even IQ. Some people with intellectual handicaps are very interesting conversationalists and have some surprising comments on life.

Posture: Be open and relaxed. Look alert, make eye contact. (But glance away and back again from time to time. Constant eye contact can seem to be staring, and most people do not appreciate that. Some even consider it aggressive or an attempt at intimidation and control.) Maybe lean forward a little, nod, murmur “yes” or “umm-hmm” occasionally. Don’t cross your arms over your chest, it will often be perceived as hostile or challenging. Relax your head/neck, face, arms, shoulders, hands. If you are facing a glare of light, you will scowl. If possible, shift your position to avoid the glare. If shifting doesn’t appear possible in a small or crowded room, say, “I’m sorry, but the glare is in my eyes. Which will bother you the least, my sunglasses or my grimacing?” Just don’t let anyone think the scowl is your response to what he or she is saying, unless the words being spoken are of an injustice or injury, etc.



Attitudes: Always listen without judgment. You are only hearing one side of any given story, so don’t render your opinion of it. If the speaker is another adult, no civil laws have been broken and no one is being harmed, just consider it a story not in need of your judgment.



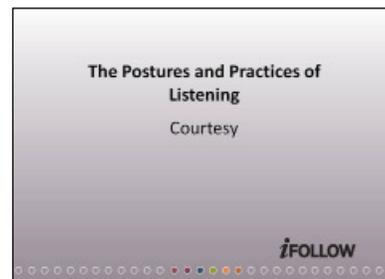
Ever know someone who always takes everything in the worst possible way, and then loudly insists, “Yes you did!” when you try to explain you didn’t mean it that way? Don’t be that person. Give others the benefit of the doubt. Try to form the habit of always taking things in the best light possible until you learn otherwise.

Never betray a confidence! Never talk behind someone’s back. Don’t just gossip. If you think something you learned from one person would be very helpful to another, talk to

the first person about sharing the information; he or she may wish to do it or give you permission to. You don't need to name the one you are talking about, and can even change a few details to further protect the privacy of your source, and still impart the lesson learned. The only exception to confidentiality is if a child is being abused or someone is in danger of being physically harmed.

If you feel put off or put upon by a certain person or they have mistreated or slandered you, pray about it. Remember God loves this person just as much as He loves you, and Jesus died for him or her. Treat this person as you would treat Jesus. Sometimes God uses "sandpaper people" to smooth out some of our own "rough spots." This does not mean you must allow yourself to be verbally misused or abused, but simply that you listen quietly and then remove yourself from the conflict. This is how you follow Christ's expectation that you will be a "peacemaker" and do more to end the conflict than if you defend yourself.

Courtesy: Good conversationalists take turns. Don't hog all the time. In fact, when you are involved in caring ministry with another person, it is important that you allow them to do most of the talking and that you do very little. If you realize you are talking too much, apologize. Conversation is not a competitive sport. Interruptions are almost never appreciated, unless the house is on fire or a mad bull is charging up behind the speaker.



If you have trouble staying focused on the words of the one you are listening to, it is probably time to interject a question that demonstrates that you are listening. Also you might say, "I focus better when I'm taking notes; will that distract you?" Then don't forget to make eye contact between jottings.

One reason our mind may wander when we are trying to listen is that the brain operates at a much faster speed than the tongue does. We often jump to conclusions before the speaker finishes the sentence and try to either finish the sentence ourselves or respond to how we think it will end. Two problems arise from this.

1. We may appear to think we know all the answers or that our ideas are best. Often the other person does not need advice or solutions. He just wants to vent. Sometimes if she hears herself rehearse the problem that will start the process of crafting a solution; articulating it to you clarifies it in her own mind. In fact, unless you are a trained professional therapist, social worker or pastor, it is best to not give advice in a caring ministry situation. That is the best protection against misunderstandings that lead to litigation.

2. We may appear to think that our time is more important than the person we are listening to and that we need to get the conversation finished as quickly as possible so that we can get on with our own agenda. If you are truly on urgent business or other time constraint, say "I'm sorry, I can only give you a minute right now, but can we set an appointment for later?" The essence of caring ministry is to give time to people who are margin-

alized and whose needs are usually pushed aside to make way for other agendas.

Stop thinking about other things, and give the speaker your full concentration. Create space in your mind for the conversation to take place. Don't plan your answer or suppress! **Look** at the speaker, does she look comfortable? Does he look open and accepting, or anxious and preoccupied? Does her body language betray that she is in emotional or physical pain? It is likely that the topic itself, or a deeper, underlying problem, is what is causing the discomfort. Now **listen** for both the words and the way the speaker feels about the subject. Is the speaker's voice natural, excited, flat, bitter, sorrowful? Are there pauses and hesitations? Feel for the hidden hurts and needs, or anger. Respond with your own face to the emotions the other person is displaying. Don't be afraid to ask, "Are you feeling -----?" But, be prepared to be corrected. You can only guess.

If you are approached by someone with a grievance, listen graciously, but unless you bear some responsibility in the matter, remember that a quick solution from you might not be wanted and may even upset the speaker, thinking that instead of really **hearing** his or her distress at the problem, your mind was busily thinking up the answer. If you do bear responsibility, apologize, and ask if there is something you can do to make amends or help the other person feel better about the incident. If your responsibility is that of a church leader who has just had a problem among members dropped in your lap, the apology might not be necessary, but questions about what can be done to resolve the situation are always useful.

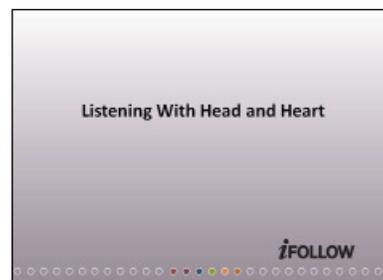
Strive not to be defensive, even if the discussion is about a mistake of yours. For you to explain is not helpful, especially when you should be listening. If you acknowledge their discomfort and apologize, that will do the most to keep them talking and help them feel better about the situation. Real solutions will only emerge as you hear them fully and completely, understand what is at the base of their concern and work together with everyone involved.

Listening with Head and Heart

Learn to listen with your heart as well as your mind. Empathize; mentally put yourself into the other person's situation. If you have been in a similar spot, this is easy, but if not, pray for understanding and use your imagination.

The night was dark, the moon a sliver. Most of the stars were hiding in the clouds. It was a perfect night for making a secret visit. And he did not want to be seen. They would ridicule him if they knew—those fellow council members of his. But something drew Nicodemus, and he met a welcome.

He started off all right: studied casualness, a little compliment. But Jesus cut through the



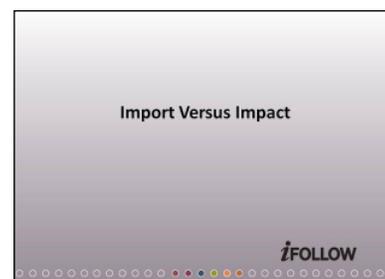
small talk and went right to the heart of the matter. He heard the words, but He responded to the mental state, the man's feelings and spiritual hunger. His visitor, on the other hand, responded to the Master's words, not His intent. Have you ever wondered if Nicodemus was being deliberately obtuse, or was he really so locked into the ritualistic formalism of his religion that he was out of touch with his own feelings? Perhaps his soul felt the tug, but he didn't know how to respond? Or maybe his feelings frightened him, so he felt the need to distract this young Rabbi with realism and debate? Besides, this "new birth" stuff didn't fit any of his religious pigeonholes.

If you read this passage slowly, you can almost feel Jesus' frustration, yet He forges ahead. Christ heard the words of temptation from Satan, but responded to the intent. He knew the Adversary was after control (Mt. 4:3-10). The Syrophenician mother heard the words of Jesus, but responded to His heart—she must have seen something in His eyes, or heard something in His tone of voice to give her confidence. (Mk. 7:25-30)

Sometimes you need to hear the deeper meanings of the bare words being spoken; the feelings hiding behind the words. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus suggested that hearing the scant words of the ten commandments—even memorizing them—is not enough. These are large concepts, in outline form, embracing much more than the bare words. "Don't murder" includes all negative, belittling actions, words, even thoughts of others. "Don't commit adultery" means don't even toy with the idea. Learn to listen to instructions in this way, but avoid reading more into someone else's story or grievance than they tell, and even with someone who's explaining your duties, you might need to verify your perception of them. Doing a little above and beyond the call of duty is nice, as long as you aren't stepping on toes by doing someone else's chores.

Import versus Impact

Be especially aware that the same word or phrase can mean different things to different people, especially those who are separated by age, ethnicity or geographical background. "Cool" comes to mind. Others are more obscure; "mango," for instance. To some, it means a bell pepper (one that isn't "pepper hot"); to other's it is a tropical tree fruit. The dictionary gives both definitions, and since both are foods, confusion can easily result.



When people talk to us, our brains automatically interpret the sounds using information already stored in our memory banks, and no two people have identical dictionaries in their heads unless they've both memorized the same printed dictionary!

All right, if we're not supposed to just follow the words being spoken to us and sort out the meanings thereof in our own heads, how are we supposed to learn? Remember the signboard at the beginning of this unit? Remember sisters A and B? Drs. Glaser and oth-

ers in the field of communications, use the word “import” to signify what the speaker means and “impact” to signify what the hearer thinks was meant. And we all know they are often diametrically opposed. Remember Stella and Dan?

Paying attention to body posture, facial expression and tone of voice are our first clues, but they can be misinterpreted. Arms across the chest can mean hostility or at least non-receptiveness, but don’t jump to conclusions; it might mean only that the individual is cold or in pain. Toe tapping or finger drumming may signal the impatience of “You’re wasting my time” or perhaps you’ve interrupted a trip to the restroom. It can even be the ‘normal’ movements of someone with ADD. Unless you know the person quite well don’t guess, ask. A concerned “Are you all right?” or “Is something wrong?” may clear the air without causing a problem, or making it worse if there is one. Just watch your own stance and tone of voice; don’t drop a little bomb such as a hands-on-hips scowling, harsh “What’s wrong with you?!” which contains a few extra pounds of explosives if preceded by “now”.

A genuine show of compassion for the other person can defuse a tricky situation, prevent escalation and lead to an appointment for a better time, if the issue merits it, or an apology if one is needed. Remember that in any difficult conversation, it helps tremendously if both (all) parties are comfortable and calm, and you can even encourage the speaker with validating comments such as, “I appreciate the time you’re giving this matter,” “I know this is troubling you, but I think we can get it straightened out,” etc.

If a “hot” incident is fresh, and difficult, it is advisable to give it time to cool off a little. If one party or the other “wants to get it solved right now,” warn that this may not be possible and at the very least would be easier in a few hours (or days, depending on the size of the problem), but if the other person fears it will only grow into unmanageable portions by delay, say a silent prayer for help and agree to give it your best try, knowing it may take another session a day or two down the road. If both (or all) of you are Christians, by all means pray aloud together at the beginning of any difficult talk.

Don’t Be A Bobble Head. While it is advisable to nod occasionally when listening, don’t do it when you aren’t. Someone important to you may be depending on you to carry through with something you’ve just nodded or um-hmmed to and if you don’t know you are supposed to do it and consequently don’t, you may be in trouble. Or worse.

Some years ago one young lady who baby-sat an infant every afternoon and evening, took the child (with the mother’s permission) to a program at the local church school. As she sat on a bench at the back of the small room, she gave half her attention to her two young sisters performing at the front of the room, and the other half to the baby bouncing energetically in her lap. She nonetheless managed to hear the lady seated next to her say, “...cute baby...” so she mm-hmmed.

The lady continued whispering, and she nodded and murmured now and then, just to be polite.

The next words to pierce her consciousness were “...Air Force base...” which made her turn to the lady and whisper, “What?”

“I asked if your husband is stationed at the base?” (There was an Air Force base not many miles away.)

Quietly but distinctly she said, “I don’t have a husband.”

The lady’s nose went up, she “hmped” loudly, and in one smooth movement bounced two inches off the bench and came down six inches away with her back to the startled girl, who sat there wondering if she had nodded or mm-hmmed to “Is it your baby?”

Clarifying

A few decades ago, it became popular to teach people to repeat back the speaker’s words at the end of every sentence, as in, “So you’re saying ‘(quote last sentence heard)’.” This supposedly let the speaker know that you were listening and following the conversation. Perhaps this was a step in the right direction, but there are better ways to do it. Some people use this method even now, but it’s as likely to irritate the speaker as to help him/her feel heard. Not to mention making the listener feel like a silly parrot.



In the first place, some sentences will be clear enough you will know what is meant without checking, but if you are the least bit unsure of the speaker’s intent, do ask. Secondly, a question asked in a calm, respectful manner, coming from a relaxed body, will usually get you the information you need in a more respectful manner than, “So, what you’re telling me is...”

What’s worse is saying , “So you think...” or “So what you mean is...” This might result in “Who do you think you are to tell me what I mean?!” Or think. So, yes, ask and be sure you know what the other person wants you to know, just don’t use the same tired question over and over, be natural and creative. And don’t feel stupid for having to ask. Remember that Jesus had to explain things to His disciples, but they started with questions, not “So what I hear You saying is that farmer wasn’t very careful-- he just threw seed all over the place.” (Mark 4:2-10)

Some ways to ask:

Does that mean...?

Are you thinking...?

So how would that work?



Can you extrapolate (or expand) on that plan for me?

If I understand correctly ...

Feeling checkers:

Do you feel ... (bewildered, overburdened, that this is unfair, etc.?)

Does that upset you?

Do you need more time to clarify your thoughts on this?

I can see this is hard for you, can I make it easier?



Encouragement:

I admire your courage in seeking to solve this problem.

Take your time.

It's all right to cry.

I'm so glad you brought this to my attention," etc.



There are probably as many questions and validations to assist you in listening to a person as there are situations and conversations that need help. Two verses to bear in mind when dealing with other people in a caring ministry situation:

1. "Whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them." (Matthew 7:12, NASB) More to the point, speak and listen to others as you would want them to speak and listen to you.
2. "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than yourself." (Philippians 2:3, NASB)

Being Heard

People who feel no one ever really listens to them may begin to feel invisible, or even as if they are becoming "non-people". And it can get worse: "Expression may implode and become **depression** when someone who needs to be heard speaks and no one is listening."

Don't rush into every little silence—it is nothing to fear, in



fact can often be a helpful part of conversation. It gives the speaker and listener both time to digest what is said. Both can mentally review what they heard. The speaker can double check to be sure what was actually said was what s/he wanted to say. The listener can decide if there is anything the least bit unclear and how to word the request for clarification. If the silence lingers and you don't feel that the issue has been satisfactorily finished, wait a moment more before asking, "Is that all for today?"

Use the time to pray silently for understanding and the other person's comfort. God won't care if you leave your eyes open and closing them might make you look as if you've shut down and are no longer even willing to listen. Don't stare; glance out a window and back or at something in the room. Take a long, slow breath as silently as possible so that it doesn't sound like a sigh. If the silence lasts more than a minute (which will seem like several), you might commiserate with "Sometimes my thoughts balk at lining up in neat sentences, too." "This isn't easy is it?" or "Should we take a break and talk about this later (or tomorrow)?" or something else you think might be comforting. Try not to appear anxious to leave. If you have to leave at a certain time, say so at the beginning, so it doesn't look as if you just want to bail out when you say you are sorry but you must leave in one more minute. If both are Christian, close with prayer; if not, ask if it is okay to pray.

Toxic Words

Never label people stupid, lazy, mean, uncooperative, dumb, mad at the world, etc. In fact, don't make accusations. If you must discuss a known fault or infraction, pray first. Ask God to help you control your body language, facial expression, tone of voice and choice of words, and to keep you quiet when necessary. Stick to known facts, stated calmly. Do not take statements made by the other person; assume s/he is angry over the incident, not at you.



There are certain phrases that will shut down almost any conversation, or at least escalate it to a shouting match where no one is hearing anyone, nothing good is being accomplished, nothing is being learned and friendships are often destroyed. A list of these follows, although in your corner of the world, the list may very well be different or incomplete. Think back to the principle of speaking to others as you wish to be spoken to, and monitor your voice, face and words accordingly.

So here is at least a partial list:

"You always ..." "You never ..." "Don't you ever ...?" "You make me ..." "How stupid." ... "What's **wrong** with you?" ... "You don't know **anything**." ... "Shut up and listen!" ... "You're just trying to ..." "If you'd use your brain." ... "You're just saying that because ..."

These last two phrases, and others similar to them, presume that you know the other

person's motives better than s/he does; you don't. Only God knows and can rightly judge anyone's motive. And accusing anyone of **making** you do, feel or respond in a negative way is a cop-out.

"You control your response even though you cannot control external events [including other people's words, moods or manners]. How you experience an event is always your choice. To opt for blame, excuses and denial is to be a victim. To choose accountability and responsibility [for your own words, moods and manners] is to be a victor." (Glaser and Glaser, pp. 179-180) It is appropriate to say in a calm voice, "When you say that, I feel ... or I want to ..." But no one is **making** you anything, it is just your honest response to things beyond your control.

Do remember that both of you are entitled to your own feelings, they are as valid to the other person as yours are to you. Everyone's reactions to any given statement or situation are also valid, but should not be expressed in ways that hurt others. If the other person does not appear to know this, it is your responsibility to model good manners anyway. If you are a parent, teacher or other influential person in someone's life perhaps you should educate him or her about toxic talk, but don't try to do this in the middle of a heated conversation, wait until a day when things between you are better, and he or she can listen without feeling attacked.

Handouts in this Package

1. Postures and Practices for Good Listening
2. The Rainbow Method



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Additional Resources

Beebe, Steven A., Beebe, Susan J., and Redmond, Mark (2007). *Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others*. Columbus, OH: Allyn & Bacon. [Also available: *Skillbuilder Workbook for Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others*.]

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Diamond, Linda Eve (2007). *Rule #1, Stop Talking!: A Guide to Listening*. Happy About.

Glaser, Susan R. and Glaser, Peter A. (2006). *Be Quiet, Be Heard: The Paradox of Persuasion*. San Francisco: Communication Solutions.

Savage, John (1996). *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon.

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Discussion Questions

1. Explain how you understand the words “hearing, listening, and giving heed.”
2. Do you feel well “heard” most of the time? Why or why not?
3. What are your best and worst listening skills? What will you do to develop them more?
4. Why do you think body language is so important? Do you think people can misunderstand that, too? Give some examples.
5. We know that God always hears us. However, do you always feel heard by God? What role(s) do you think humans play in helping each other to feel heard even by God?

Group Activities

Activity One

Purpose: To discover how helpful our listening skills are at the beginning of the unit, and to practice the new skills learned afterwards.

Preparation: You will need space for pairs to talk with reasonable privacy.

Assignment: Divide the class into pairs; if there is an uneven number, leader will participate. This will work best if the partners do not know each other well, but friends are okay. Tell them they have 3 to 5 minutes for one person to talk about his or her pet peeve. Nothing personal-- general things such as rude drivers, noisy neighbors, large, friendly dogs that want to jump all over you and “lick you to death,” store clerks who hover, lukewarm food in restaurants, etc. Then switch roles, letting the other person vent for the next 3 to 5 minutes.

Debrief: When time is up, ask for a show of hands as to how many: (1) Felt they were understood when they spoke. (2) Were satisfied with the amount of response they received. Would have preferred more? or less? Allow two or three individuals to share with the group the nicest/best part of the listener’s response while they spoke.

Time: Allow 10 minutes for sharing in pairs and 10 to 15 for group sharing and discussion. Note: If there is time, this exercise should be repeated at the end of the session, using a different emotional topic, such as “My worst day at work” ... “My worst accident” (not limited to auto accidents) ... “My worst illness” ... etc. Then ask how many felt better heard the second time around.

Activity Two

Purpose: To gain tools for clarifying, especially in a difficult conversation.

Preparation: This is best done with a chalk board, dry erase board or large poster board tacked up in the front where all can see it. Divide the surface into three columns. Label them “Facts” ... “Feelings” ... “Encouragement.”

Assignment: Ask class for question starters for clarification, further information, or perception checking, to be sure they understand what the speaker was intending to convey, while you write them on the board in the first two columns. The list should include such items as these on the info side: does that mean...?, are you thinking...?, so how would that work?, can you extrapolate (or expand) on that plan for me?, If I understand correctly ..., etc. On the feeling side, you might expect to see things like this: Do you feel ... (bewildered, overburdened, that this is unfair, etc.?, Does that upset you?, Do you need more time to clarify your thoughts on this?, I can see this is

hard for you, can I make it easier?

Now ask them to give starters for positive statements of encouragement such as, “I admire your courage in seeking to solve this problem,” “Take your time,” “It’s all right to cry.” “I’m so glad you brought this to my attention,” etc.

Finally, ask class members to tell you which ones they would prefer be used by someone who is listening to them, and which ones they would not like and why. This exercise can be a very good learning tool for everyone involved.

Time: Allow at least 20 to 30 minutes for this exercise.

Handout 1

Postures and Practices of Good Listening

Posture: open, relaxed, alert

Eye contact

Attitudes: Always listen without judgment.

Never betray confidence! Never talk behind someone's back.

Courtesy:

Focus on the other person

Speed of talking vs. speed of listening

Don't give advice

Give the gift of time

Stop thinking about other things; give the person your full concentration.

If they complain or are hurt or angry, try not to defend

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Handout 2

The Rainbow Method

Here is a mini refresher course to take home with you and look over when you face a difficult conversation. You will not need to go over it many times, before you can just think “Rainbow” and it all falls into place.

Red: Stop all activity possible, so that you can concentrate on the matter at hand. This includes the things running through you head and making a quiet place within.

Orange: Look directly at the other person; does s/he look comfortable? Is there something you can do or say that will make this easier for him/her? Remember to make plenty of eye contact, but don't stare.

Yellow: Listen with your brain and your heart, without judgment or preconceived notions about the speaker or the subject. Wait till you have all the facts available, and even then, don't make a judgment call unless you are asked or you are in a supervision position and need to.

Green: Evaluate what has been said using all you actually know about the situation, some of which may be from other sources. If you are not clear on all aspects, ask respectful questions. Pray (silently unless you know the other person is agreeable), ask for wisdom and God's will in the matter. Then think before you speak

Blue: Summarize the facts briefly and aloud. If some of these facts are from other sources, explain how you are familiar with them, so that both of you are aware of all points.

Purple: Respond. Now you are ready to say something worthwhile in response to the situation. If you have been asked to give an opinion or make a decision, or if you are in a position (boss, parent, etc.) where you need to, do so, or explain that you wish to ponder and pray a little more and will give your answer tomorrow. If no decision is necessary, sympathize and reassure that you are willing to lend your ears again if necessary. The speaker can now think it through on his/her own and cope with it.

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