

# Integrating Communication Skills: Attending, Active Listening, Empathy and Encountering

This project tool is for learning and practicing some key communication skills. We suggest that you find a buddy or a partner to make the learning easy and fun.

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## *Objectives*

1. To learn to listen for events, feelings and behaviors when you are listening to others.
2. To become aware of your own greatest obstacles to good listening.
3. To become proficient at the skill of communicating to others that you are listening to them.
4. To learn the difference between encountering and listening.

## *Pretest*

1. Check any of the following that normally apply to you when you listen to others:

- I maintain some good eye contact.
- I face the speaker squarely rather than facing them partially.
- My arms and legs are not crossed.
- I lean slightly toward them.

- My posture is relaxed.
- I occasionally reflect back the core message of what I'm hearing

2. Check any of the following that apply to you when you listen to others:

- having a hard time concentrating on what is being said, daydreaming
- overeagerness, speaking too soon, interrupting
- giving advice, suggesting useful courses of action
- I evaluate their action or tell them what I would have done in the same situation
- I try to share about some related, helpful information.
- I tell about a similar experience that I had.
- I asking questions to learn important details.
- I don't like to say anything.
- Whenever something bad happened I try to express sympathy or pity.
- If the person is talking about a problem, I try to share a solution or a resource.

3. Which of the following listening tasks are hard for you:

- Understanding what the person is feeling.
- Understanding the gist of what happened.
- Naming the feeling(s) that the person is experiencing.
- Knowing when to say something.
- Putting what I think I heard them say into words.

4. When you want to tell a close friend or family member about something that happened to you, what do most often want from them. Please rate the following six items, giving a '6' to what you most often want, and a '1' to what you least often want.

- Praise or encouragement
  - Advice on what to do next, or a solution to your problem
  - Simple attention, just to take in what you're talking about
  - A value judgment on whether or not you behaved properly
  - Participating in your experience, by somehow showing by words or gestures that they know how you felt.
  - Being personally open to what you experience, by letting themselves be affected by what you're talking about, and by sharing how they feel about what you care about.
- (If what you most often want is not in the above list, please add it here: \_\_\_\_\_)

5. Which of the following most annoy you when you are trying to be heard?

- they have a hard time concentrating on what is being said, they daydream
- they try to give advice, suggesting useful courses of action
- they tell me what they would have done in the same situation
- they try to share about some useful information
- they tell a story about a similar experience that they had.

- \_\_\_ they interrupt you
- \_\_\_ they ask too many questions.
- \_\_\_ they are silent, they don't say anything
- \_\_\_ they patronize me or express sympathy or pity
- \_\_\_ they try to tell you the solution to your problem

### *What your answers mean*

(1) Each of these behaviors is generally known to enhance communication in Euro-American culture. Some of them, such as eye-contact and reflecting the core message of what you heard are not norms for Afro-American or other cultures.

(2) These behaviors are *not* often helpful to communication. Some are helpful when used sparingly, but most of the time they involve "taking the ball away" and introducing your own agenda into the conversation. In a helping or listening situation they interfere. In a two-way conversation, they must *follow* clear listening to be effective.

(3) The process of active listening involves many skills. Sometimes people have problems with just one part of the process. If this is the case, you will have a better idea what to work on if you understand the area that you are weak in.

(4) To understand how to be a good listener, it may help to find out what you want from others. If you know what you want, it is likely, but not always the case, that others will want a similar kind of listening from you. If you are not sure what people want, you can ask them.

(5) This list is similar to the list in (2). If you know what bothers you about others' listening, it might give you another clue to your listening habits.

### *Definitions*

Whether you would like to listen in order to help someone reach their goals, or listen to be *with* someone, good listening skills can be learned. This material covers four basic skill areas: attending, active listening, empathy and encountering. A definition of each follows:

*Attending* is paying attention to and being present to someone. This involves both body language and a mental tuning in to the speaker.

*Active Listening* is listening to the speaker's verbal messages, watching the speaker's nonverbal messages, actively determining the speaker's feelings, behaviors and experiences and listening to the person as fully as possible by trying to "put it all together."

*Empathy* is reflecting the core message of what you heard. Usually this involves naming the feeling(s) and the relevant experience or behaviors.

*Encountering* is listening with empathy, then asking questions in order to be able to give your unique reaction to what another person cares about.

### *Making room for these behaviors*

When learning new behaviors, it's important to be aware of the behaviors they will be replacing. You are probably aware that slouching back, crossing your arms, and looking away are all examples of body language that implies one is not listening. These behaviors are ones that you will probably want to replace with ones that show you are listening, for example leaning slightly forward (see *Attending* below.)

In the same way, many people who do not actively listen are doing something else with their minds. They may be thinking of other things such as advice they might want to give, pronouncements or judgments, or their own problems, etc. So, as you begin to practice these skills, try to become aware of the habits these skills are replacing. For example if you tend to make judgments about what you hear, when you catch yourself making a judgment, you can say to yourself, "oh, yeah, I want to be actively listening,"--and then listen. With practice, you can catch yourself sooner at your poor listening behavior, and perhaps eventually eliminate it.

### *Attending*

There are two parts to attending: your body language and your tuning in or paying attention. Regarding body language there are five microskills that *generally* imply you are listening. When you do these you will find that they actually help you listen better.

1. Face the person *squarely*, instead of facing partly away or at an angle.
2. *Open* your arms and legs, rather than crossing them.
3. *Lean* forward slightly from the base of the spine, to show your involvement.
4. Make *eye contact* rather than looking off or looking at your fingernails. This doesn't mean staring, but it does mean direct eye contact as much as appropriate. You will probably be able to tell if the other person is comfortable or not with your gaze.
5. *Relax* rather than be hurried or analytically intense. You are trying to be with a person, you are not studying them through a microscope.

It is true that you could use these skills in a manipulative fashion. For instance, leaning forward usually encourages people to reveal more because they believe that you are interested in what they are saying. So you must be careful to use these microskills only when you intend to sincerely listen. Without the inner attention, the tuning in, you are being fake.

Inner attending is simply paying attention and not letting your mind wander. You may already have learned how difficult this is. By making a firm intention to pay attention, and by practicing the following skill of active listening, you will find that paying attention can get easier.

### *Active Listening*

Active listening, as the name suggests, is an active process. As you listen to the person speak and watch their facial expressions and body language, you're actively asking yourself the following three questions:

- 1) *What is or was this person feeling?*
- 2) *What exactly did this person experience?*
- 3) *What did this person do? How did she or he react?*

Periodically you're asking yourself a fourth question that integrates these:

- 4) *What's the essence, the core message, of what's happening to this person?*

While you're not necessarily looking for a pattern or the big picture, you want to integrate the particular feelings, behaviors, and experiences into a meaningful whole.

### *"Listening" to Nonverbal Behavior*

How much of a person's communication is nonverbal? It is likely to be more than you think. A study was done (Mehrabian, 1971) in which people expressed liking for a person. Total liking was determined on average to be 7% verbal liking (what was said) 38% vocal liking (tone of voice) and 55% facial liking (the facial expressions used.) One of Mehrabian's conclusions was "If the facial expression is inconsistent with the words, the degree of liking conveyed by the facial expression will dominate and determine the impact of the total message."

Nonverbal listening can include 1) what you hear: tone of voice, loudness, inflection, pauses, pacing; 2) what you see: facial expression, blushing, pupil dilation, height,

weight, posture, grooming, make-up, clothing; and 3) what you smell: body odor, perfume, cologne.

### *Listening to Verbal Behavior*

Verbal listening can be helped by listening for three specifics: 1) What is s/he feeling? 2) What has s/he experienced? 3) What is s/he doing? (How is s/he behaving?)

Experiences and behaviors can be overt (external) or covert (internal). Overt can be openly seen, covert cannot. For example, getting fired from a job or getting a raise are overt experiences, while having hunger pains or an attack of depression are covert experiences. Similarly behaviors can be overt or covert. Saying something or doing something such as hitting someone or buying them a present are overt behaviors. Making a judgment, daydreaming or thinking are covert behaviors. Sometimes there is a fine line between an experience and a behavior. If someone feels they have no control over something such as compulsive thoughts, then that can be considered an experience.

Sometimes people will actually name how they are feeling or were feeling. "He made me so mad!" Other times you can get a good idea of how someone feels or felt by their tone of voice, or by their facial expressions or other nonverbal behaviors. You can also get an idea from the context of the situation, and by imagining how one would feel in that situation. "I missed passing the entrance exam by one point." Sometimes listening for all three is necessary: either the person doesn't identify the feeling, or they can't identify it precisely, or you are getting mixed signals which may mean that they are feeling more than one feeling or they are not being accurate.

### *Empathy*

Since empathy is reflecting the core message of what you heard and observed, active listening is a necessary stepping-stone to empathy. This section covers reasons for learning and practicing empathy; the how-to of empathy; and obstacles to empathy (and active listening and attending.)

#### Why Use Empathy?

Many people study empathy to become better listeners. However, you will also find that practicing empathy, in other words, trying to enter the frame of reference of another person is a way to avoid conflicts and is also a step in resolving conflicts. Equally important, empathy is a tool for helping people solve problems and reach goals. If you think about it, you may often talk through problems or your goals with others. You may already realize that a good listener acts as a mirror and shows you where you are at and what you want and value.

Although there are many radically different schools of psychology, empathy (or active listening as it is sometimes known) is almost universally taught to counselors and psychologists as a tool that allows them to help clients resolve personal problems and make changes in their lives. When it is taught, it is usually recognized as the fundamental communication skill. Fundamental both because it is the foundation for other communication skills and because it may be *the* most powerful of all the communication skills.

But beyond using empathy as an instrument or tool to help oneself or others, it has its own intrinsic value. Being with a person can be useful to you or them to end conflicts, build rapport or reach a goal, but being with a person as a form of verbal intimacy is generally considered an end in itself.

### *The How-To of Empathy*

If you have been actively listening to someone, you have the pieces of an empathic response; all you need to do is verbalize them in an appropriate manner. You know what the person is feeling, what s/he has experienced and how s/he has behaved. This is the core message of what is going on.

A "partial formula" for an empathic response is:

"You feel (emotion or feeling) because of (experience or behavior)."

Examples would be:

"You feel excited because you are about to go on vacation to a new place."

"You feel oppressed because you keep thinking about your lack of opportunity."

"You feel afraid because getting a new job will take you out of Pittsburgh."

A complete formula for an empathic response involves tentativeness. You must admit you are not certain of the other person's feelings because you are not them. So by using a tentative expression, or by tone of voice, you need to show you are making a respectful guess.

For example, if I believe a person is feeling angry and I say "Well, of course you're angry about what was done!" the person may resent me sounding so certain-whether I am accurate or not. The point is that both your word choice and your tone of voice should communicate some uncertainty, because you don't know exactly how they feel. Some examples of tentative lead-ins: "It sounds as though..." "It appears you..." "Could it be

that..." "I wonder if..." "Maybe you feel..." "Let me see if I understand you; you..." "Let me see if I'm with you, you..." "What I hear you saying is..." "Is it possible that..." Try not to use the same phrase over and over again because it can make the person self-conscious or think that you are not really making an effort to listen wholeheartedly.

So a complete formula for empathy would be:

"Tentative expression + you are (a feeling) because of (an experience or behavior.)"

Here are three examples:

"Maybe you're feeling overwhelmed because of the new job, the move and being pregnant."

"If I'm understanding you, you were overwhelmed by the Peaceful Lifestyle Assessment because there's so much you're not doing."

"Is it possible that your feeling both frightened and excited because of the new job in another city?" (note dual feelings.)

When you get comfortable with empathy, you'll be able to break out of the formula and just reflect the core message of what you heard, by identifying the feelings and experience/behavior. Here are some examples:

"Sounds like you feel on top of the world. You finally asserted yourself!" (Note that a phrase was used instead of a single word like exuberant or thrilled.)

"Failing over and over is frustrating, isn't it?"

"You feel like giving up on the smoking goal." (Note that despair is implied by the behavior of giving up. Also note that tentativeness may be communicated by tone of voice.)

### *Obstacles and Alternatives to Attending, Active Listening, and Empathy*

Almost anything can get in the way, so it takes continual self-awareness and practice. Here are some obstacles:

- \* being tired or ill
- \* feeling preoccupied by your own problem or agenda.
- \* prejudice

- \* attraction to the person, or aversion to the person.
- \* daydreaming
- \* overeagerness, speaking too soon
- \* poor attitudes, such as "I've heard it all before."
- \* preoccupation with the mechanics of the skill, rather than the essence.

Here are some alternatives to real empathy:

- \* parroting: mindlessly repeating what they said.
- \* giving advice, suggesting action
- \* making a judgment or pronouncement
- \* making a psychological, religious, political or social interpretation that pigeon-holes or stereotypes.
- \* talking about a similar experience that you had, telling a favorite story.
- \* asking questions (sometimes appropriate, sometimes not.)
- \* silence
- \* expressing sympathy or pity
- \* a cliché such as "It happens to the best of them."
- \* pretending to understand by a nod of the head or some other gesture.
- \* inaccurate empathy (you have the wrong feeling, or the wrong intensity.) For instance:  
 (speaker:) "I'm upset that my girlfriend passed the cheerleading test and I didn't."  
 (listener:) "I guess her success made you feel somewhat inadequate.."  
 (speaker:) "No, I was upset because she'll go on to have experiences and friends that I won't. This will separate us. I'm afraid we won't be close friends someday."

Here's another example of inaccurate empathy, one that communicates the wrong intensity:

(speaker:) "When I told her about the hundred dollars I lost, she said 'You'll get over it.' Can you believe it!?"

(listener:) "Sounds like you were miffed by what she said."

(speaker:) "Miffed?!-I was *furious*! I guess this isn't a big deal to *you*, but it is to me."

### *Cautions in using empathy*

- \* Give yourself time to formulate your response. You don't have to reflect the core message of each statement.
- \* Use empathy gradually in your relationships with others. If suddenly one day you are very empathetic it will be noticed and it will seem unnatural (because a sudden change is unnatural.) If someone notices the change, you may just say you're trying to change the quality of your listening.
- \* When you become good at empathy you will find that conversations become longer, because people tend to elaborate and move forward when they feel they are being heard. Because of this, and because your job in life is probably not "counselor for the world," you will probably want to decide in which relationships and situations you want to use empathy regularly, in which situations you want to do it occasionally, and in which situations it would not be appropriate for you.

### *Encountering*

Encountering goes beyond empathy to personally involve yourself. Just as with empathy, you need to decide in what relationships and situations it is appropriate. Empathy is essentially reflecting the core message of what is said back to a person. Encountering is communicating your stance, some of what you care about to the person. It goes beyond merely giving your opinion on what another is saying because, first you learn enough about that person's stance—so that it is personalized, unique to them. Second, you share in such detail that the person knows your unique position or stance not just whether you are for or against something, but exactly how, exactly why. The following is excerpted from *His Way* by Fr. David Knight.

"The first step in an encounter is to really *confront* what another is saying or doing....To 'confront' means to really listen as opposed to just letting someone's words come in without registering.... It means a positive choice to follow up on what we have heard, to

pursue the topic further until we can make some personal response of our own to what the other has said....to let oneself be challenged by what another has said: to accept the challenge of understanding it, the challenge of responding to it, the challenge of taking a stance toward it."

"...the next step: You would *ask questions*....to let you make connections between my experience and your own experience...You keep asking questions until something I say calls for a value-response from you. It may be an idea.... or an attitude or value that you admire or disapprove of."

"...this brings us to the third stage required for real encounter: You have to *take a stance* with your will toward the other person's reality. You cannot do this except through taking a stance toward what the person has said or done."

### *Final thoughts*

"All real living is meeting."- Martin Buber

"Most of us die with our music still within us." - Oliver Wendell Holmes

"Our lives are shaped by those who love us, and by those who refuse to love us."- Fr. John Powell

"Caring moves history forward." - Tim Cimino

Listening and empathy are tremendous gifts that we can give to one another. These are profound ways to meet others. These are ways to help others unlock the music and the gifts within themselves. Perhaps, Fr. Powell's quote could be paraphrased, "Our lives are shaped by those who deeply listen to us, and by those who refuse to listen to us." Finally, listening, since it is part of caring, moves personal histories forward, and these move the world forward.

### **Remember Forever**

To learn the concepts better we ask you to take a few minutes to review the following, and then explain the concepts to a willing friend, family member or co-worker.

1. Attending is mental *and* physical presence (communicated via your body.)

It involves tuning in to what is being said, and physically orientating yourself toward the other person with posture, eyes and mind.

2. Active listening involves actively asking yourself a) what is the person experiencing/ what have they experienced? b) what is the person feeling/what were they feeling? c) what did the person do about it?
3. Empathy is reflecting the *core message* of what you heard. It usually has two parts: a feeling and an experience or behavior.
4. Encountering others goes beyond empathy to give your personal response, to take a stance toward what is being said. The three steps are a) empathy, b) asking questions to connect your experience with theirs c) making a personal stance on what they said or did.

## **Exercises**

### *Empathy Exercise 1*

Directions:

1. Pair up. Person A takes a turn reading one of the statements on the next page.
2. Person B gives two a formula empathic response according to the following formula:  
  
"Seems like + you're (feeling) because of (experience or behavior.)"
3. Person A checks to make sure all three parts are present and sufficiently accurate, otherwise s/he states what is missing or inaccurate. Note that there is not just one right answer.
4. Then Person A repeats the original statement. Person B gives an empathic response in their own words to the statement that contains a) a tentative phrase, b) a reflection of the core message (feeling and experience/behavior.)
5. Person A checks to make sure all three parts are present and accurate, and makes suggestions if they weren't.
6. The pair goes onto the next statement with the pair switching roles. Some sample answers are listed below.
  - a. "Doing the Peaceful Lifestyle Assessment was a real eye opener. I had no idea I had that much of an impact!"
  - b. "I've had this dieting goal for years, but I don't seem to be getting anywhere. Things work for a time, but then I lose momentum and the weight comes back. I need to do something, but I'm not looking forward to the ordeal."

c. "Some of these goals I'm working on are pretty personal. And that makes me wonder 'who do you think you are?' You're not a professional. I've trusted people before with this information and been burned. I don't want to get burned again."

d. "When I share my small business dreams with my wife/husband s/he just moans about how much it's going to cost. She doesn't see that my heart is in it!"

e. "When I did the Peaceful Lifestyle Assessment it hit me how much I'm not doing. There's just so much to do!--And my schedule is already stuffed. Then I looked at all the goal-setting forms you guys have created! Oh my God--talk about using up trees!"

f. "Yesterday I had this feeling that everything was going to work out. It just came over me that I had dealt with this situation before about 10 years ago, and I remembered how I coped. I can do it again, and I realize that I even have more experience now. I'll get by."

g. "I don't have much money left. I've been looking for a job for three months now, but there's no jobs out there for a person like me. I feel like giving up, but how am I going to support my four-year-old?"

h. "I can deal with everything but politics. The whole system's corrupt. They're all criminals who haven't been caught yet. It's a waste of time to vote or become informed. It worked at one time, but it's slowly getting more and more ineffective. Like I said, there's nothing one I can do that will make a real difference."

i. "On one hand I want to make things better between us, but on the other hand I don't think we have a future together. We just want different things. Patching things up would be good, but then that will start the whole cycle over again: getting our hopes up, feeling excited and in love again, but then the energy we generate together sends us in two different directions. I just don't know whether to try again or give up."

j. "I finally got up the nerve to tell my boss what I wanted, and it worked! It turned out s/he was feeling the same way. I was transferred two days ago, and I am really thrilled about the new assignment and the people in the office are really great."

### *Empathy Exercise 2*

Real practice: Again in pairs, one person talk about one of your goals and your experiences positive and negative in working toward the goals. The listener, when appropriate makes an empathic statement in their own words. If the speaker feels this is accurate, say so. If the speaker feels s/he is not being understood accurately, say so and make a restatement, such as "It's not so much that I was feeling angry, I was feeling disappointed."

After the first person has made three accurate empathy statements, switch roles. Keep going back and forth until your time is used up. (About 20-30 minutes.)

### *Empathy Exercise 3*

Practice it in your everyday relationships: Do empathy consciously an average of three times a day for a week.

To become comfortable and good with empathy takes lots of practice and feedback and concentration. Unless you are already skilled or naturally gifted it will take:

1. The sensitivity and humility to understand that you are probably not a good listener.
2. The belief (or the willingness to test the belief) that good listening is worth the sacrifice you will need to make, that is, that it is worth giving up your agenda in the listening. In other words, that it is worth giving up the internal commentary often going on in your head, and worth holding off judgment, solutions, your favorite stories, etc.)
3. Concentrating on understanding what the person experienced, did and felt.
4. Finding the words that reflect the gist of what you heard
5. Listening and watching for the verbal and nonverbal response that tell you if you were on target or not.

Since it takes effort to retrain yourself, it's recommended that you focus on one relationship or environment at first and get good at empathy there before expanding into other relationships or social environments.

It sometimes helps to make up visual reminders to yourself to use empathy. A piece of colored tape on your phone, a picture at the office, or an object on the dining room table could be a reminder to you. It may also help to keep a journal of some of your successes and failures so that you can learn from them.

### *Exercise 4: Encountering*

With a partner, each take a turn to share an appreciation or an experience that has been important to you. The listener is to first empathize; then when they are aware that they're being accurate, to ask questions to come to a deeper understanding; then when they feel they have an intimate understanding, to make an I-statement about their personal response to what was said or done. Then the partners switch roles.

## **Review Schedule**

Mark dates in your calendar for the following reviews:

· One week review:

- a) Do Empathy exercise three, by doing empathy at least 21 times in a week.
- b) Repeat the "Remember Forever" exercise by explaining the principles in "Remember Forever to another person.

· One-month review:

- a) Do Empathy exercise three, by doing empathy at least 21 times in a week.
- b) Repeat the "Remember Forever" exercise by explaining the principles in "Remember Forever to another person.

· Three-month review:

- a) Do Empathy exercise three, by doing empathy at least 21 times in a week.
- b) Repeat the "Remember Forever" exercise by explaining the principles in "Remember Forever to another person.

· Six-month reviews:

- a) Do Empathy exercise three, by doing empathy at least 21 times in a week.
- b) Repeat the "Remember Forever" exercise by explaining the principles in "Remember Forever to another person.
- c) If appropriate, use the encounter technique once.

## **References for further learning**

*You And Me: The Skills Of Communicating And Relating To Others* by Gerard Egan. Filled with good exercises and insightful points.

*The Skilled Helper* by Gerard Egan. A book to teach communication and counseling skills. This is more involved than You And Me.

*Exercises In Helping Skills* by Gerard Egan. This is the workbook for the Skilled Helper.

*His Way* by Fr. David Knight. This is mostly about Christian evangelization, but contains a few sections on communication skills, including "encountering."

### Some Sample Answers to Exercise One

a. Formula: "It seems like you're impressed by what you learned about yourself in the assessment." Nonformula: "I'm getting that you're surprised by the difference you're already making!"

b. Formula: "Seems like you're dreading going back on your diet." Nonformula: "I think I'm picking up both extreme frustration at your past experiences with dieting, and a real dread of starting into it again."

c. Formula: "Seems like you feel you need to be cautious because people have violated your trust." Nonformula: "I'm hearing that you've been hurt when you've shared personal information before, and that's why you're hesitant to share with me now."

f. Formula: "It seems like you're feeling confident you will handle because you've done this before." Nonformula: "I'm sensing a kind of awakening to trust in your abilities, is that right?"

Date you started working with this material \_\_\_\_\_

Date you completed the initial work on this material \_\_\_\_\_

Date you completed your final six-month review \_\_\_\_\_

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