

Active Listening

If you are a victim of abuse and/or sexual violence, having a supportive partner or another person can be a great help. This leaflet has been produced so that you may share it with friends and family if you wish.

We hope that this guide will help you understand how difficult it is for anyone to listen actively about most things. Add to this the fact that if you speak to a person close to you about your upsetting material, they will feel pain and become vicarious secondary victims to some degree... Nevertheless, within close loving relationships it is usually wise to disclose what has happened simply because your experience becomes part of you, it will change your feelings and behaviour and will be difficult to hide.

There may be some vulnerable people who you choose to protect by not disclosing, but where the others are concerned you have a right to share and in most cases, you should. Those who love you may not have all the skills and information that you need to resolve your issues, but their presence, care and background support can be like strong steady rocks upon which you can start to rebuild your life.

It is sometimes best for you to choose who your 'listener' will be; a person who is not easily shocked, a person who already demonstrates some listening ability and a person with whom you feel comfortable. Share this with them and take control by checking out that they are willing and able to help.

With everyone else it is often best to let them know that you're doing your work with a counsellor and you will talk with them about things when you're ready. And in the meantime, it will assist you most of all if they help you get on with everyday life as much as possible. It is also valid to ask them **not** to ask the "Are you alright?" kinds of question for the reasons mentioned later on.

Active Listening is hard and is more than just skill; it is a matter of attitude and is a challenging part of counsellor training which can take years to learn. To be an active listener, one must accept people for who they are, what they are, where they are and **for what has happened to them**. One must accept their feelings, values, (their likes and dislikes) and their right to make choices for themselves as they resolve their issues; **because their issues (however painful to you) belong to them**. This is true whether those issues are small such as choosing what clothes to wear through to those issues surrounding the fact that they have been the victim of sexual violence. Being able to listen actively builds trust, rapport and empathy with the speaker.

How to be a good active listener:

Opening: This can be the most critical point and if one makes mistakes it can take communication in the wrong direction from the start and set up barriers. Let's look at what can go wrong...

The most commonly mistaken opening statements and questions may seem caring but instead they load the victim with the listener's hopes, fears and needs. This puts the speaker (victim) into a position where they will be considering your feelings instead of theirs, into a position where instead of being able to speak freely they will endeavour to protect and reassure you. For a victim of abuse and sexual violence they then have added burdens to carry and instead of being able to focus on their needs they are distracted by yours. This can easily lead to greater feelings of isolation.

Specifically:

- “Are you alright”? “How are you”? “Are you feeling any better”? These questions are often repeated with more and more emphasis, transmitting the state of anxiety being experienced by the questioner. This is likely to upset an already traumatised victim; they are likely to feel responsible for your pain and may re-associate with the abusive and traumatic event/s.
- Asking questions about circumstances and detail is disrespectful and may feel voyeuristic.
- Asking leading questions that are more likely to take the speaker away from their material and instead reveal your train of thought.
- Crying, hugging and in other ways attempting to soothe a victim because you can't manage the suffering.

Good opening statements convey **an interest in where the other person is emotionally and what they are thinking and feeling**. Statements should always convey respect and acceptance that the other person may not wish to talk. Opening statements should be accompanied by body language, facial expressions and voice tone that reflect all the concepts above. An opening can be as little as a smile accompanied by an open gesture (opening of one's hands) that conveys the message that you are there for the victim. It could be a long sentence including all or most of the above concepts. A quiet voice, a gentle disposition together with an ability to remain silent and still while the speaker thinks are excellent listening resources.

Then as the listener:

Hear the message:

- Stop other tasks, and don't allow interruptions.
- Pay attention.
- Put to one side your emotional material; and follow up with counselling and support if required.
- Focus on the information that is important for the speaker.
- Search for and recognise emotional messages.

Interpret the message

Speakers do not always say exactly what they mean or mean exactly what they say, so one needs to paraphrase what they have said in the form of a question in an attempt to ensure that your understanding of the speaker's message is accurate. This ensures that the speaker goes inside, connects with their feelings and searches for words to describe where they are. It also conveys to the speaker that you are actively listening to them.

Look for non-verbal cues that might contradict what the speaker is saying. If verbals and non-verbals don't match, respectfully check it out with the speaker.

Evaluate the message

Ensure that you have all of the important information then consider it together before forming ideas about what you are being told. Then check out your interpretation by:

Asking open questions that help the other person to search for their conclusions. Ask questions that take the other person inside to consider their thoughts and feelings while at the same time demonstrating your attention, interest and complete focus on everything that the speaker is about to say.

Reflect your perceptions of the speakers statements back to them as a way of further checking out your understanding.

Know and have faith that by helping the person who is talking to stay in their world with their feelings and thoughts, they will find their solutions and answers. This is always empowering for a victim.

Respond to the message

Acknowledge the speaker's feelings. Responding allows you and the speaker to reach a common understanding. Active listening does not necessitate agreement with the speaker; it means clarifying and understanding the speaker's feelings and point of view.

Barriers to active listening:

Judging people.

Our tendency to judge people distorts our ability to really hear their message. While a person is talking to us we can often spend more time applying labels to them, or thinking about what we want to say in argument instead of listening to their message.

Thinking in advance that you know what someone is going to say.

This can lead to mentally 'tuning out' before the speaker is finished talking, or even interrupting and finishing their sentence. In either case, it leads to misunderstanding, frustration, and possibly even anger and conflict.

Saying, "I know how you feel".

This can sound intrusive or it can sound as if you're bored and don't want to hear any more.

Using the word 'Why?' in your questioning.

This word can put the speaker under pressure to come up with reasons and explanations. It is a harsh demanding word in most circumstances. This may take the speaker away from where they were going into a position where they have to meet your need for an understandable answer; an answer which may not be the truth.

Twisting a message and/or searching for solutions and answers.

This can cause you to only hear what suits you and your own ideas and to lose concentration on what the speaker is really saying. The result is that the person being listened to is taken away from their issues, their feelings and thoughts and is led into your world feeling diminished and powerless.

One's own emotional baggage.

This can cause you to misinterpret what someone is saying. For example, if a person discloses abuse, listeners who have not dealt with their own baggage are likely to recommend their own unhealthy coping strategies. They may also over identify with the speaker or inappropriately self-disclose and in so doing take the focus away from the speaker.

Any one of the points above will virtually ensure that a speaker will withdraw.

See Active Listening in the DABS Directory Book List section