

# Lend an Ear

By Cheryl Clement

Perhaps the most basic element affecting communication between people involves our very human tendency to judge and evaluate what others say to us. We understand much of what we experience by comparing and contrasting our experiences. This is useful in most facets of our lives, but it can become a barrier to communication if we use it to judge what someone is sharing with us.

The judgment, whether it is favorable or unfavorable, operates as a filter which selectively screens out portions of what someone is trying to tell us. We need to find ways to just be with them, to put aside any evaluations and to hear all of what they are saying, from *their* point of view, not ours.

Another very basic element in communication is to be psychologically present, to create a capsule which surrounds us and the person with whom we are communicating, so that other concerns (our shopping list, errands, problems at home) stay outside. We need to monitor our internal state, to notice when our minds start to wander, and then to gently bring ourselves back. There is often a temptation, when we have drifted away, to try to fake it, to pretend we have heard everything they have said. Even though it may feel awkward, it is more useful to ask them to repeat what we have missed. Asking them to repeat themselves is also important when we could not hear due to outside noise or because they spoke too softly or unclearly.

Many times, we spend the time that we are not speaking formulating what we have to say next rather than truly listening to what we are being told. We need to trust that we will remember what we have to share and that it will come back to us at an appropriate time if it was really important.

In being present with someone, eye contact is extremely important. Eye contact is most supportive when it is soft and holding, not hard and riveting.

Another way to communicate that we are attending them is to reflect back to them what they have said. This is often referred to as active listening and involves paraphrasing their words. In doing this, we try to summarize or synthesize their message, not to parrot back their words, although repeating words or phrases that carry an emotional charge can be helping in affirming to them that they have been understood.

Most of us, in our own anxiety, have a tendency to fill silences that last over a few seconds. Silence is a very important psychological process. It allows people to reflect on what they have said, and then to decide what to say next. It may be appropriate for you to use the space to say something but be sure that it is an addition to the conversation,

not manufactured just to fill in the gap. Sometimes people will pause as they are talking or will search for a word. Don't rescue them immediately. Let them struggle, and support them by respecting their efforts.

In communicating with someone, we need to acknowledge their feelings without trying to change them. They will allow their feeling to evolve, but not until they have been witnessed and acknowledged.

It is also important to be able to tolerate silences. Most of us have a strong drive to "make it better", to try to take the emotional pain away. But emotional pain, unlike physical pain, must be experienced in order for a healing to take place.

Something else I have learned, usually by making mistakes, is not to assume that the person is using words the same way I am. We may not be using the same definitions, so it is very important, particularly with words describing emotional or cognitive states, to find out what they mean. If they say they are depressed, ask them to paint you a word picture of what that looks like for them. If they say they are confused, ask them to elaborate on the confusion. You are asking them to educate you about their internal condition. They are the experts in this area; let them share their expertise with you.

If you both start to talk at the same time, stop and ask them to go on. Sometimes we attempt to quell our anxiety by wanting to finish what we were saying. But we already know what we were going to say, and we might never find out what they wanted to share.

Throughout our time of sitting with someone in emotional pain, it is very helpful to keep processing our own internal state and to notice what body sensations we are having. Are your shoulders up to your ears? Is your stomach in knots? As you become aware of those tensions in your body, breathe into them and release as much as you can, so you can continue to be open to what is being communicated to you.

Just as we need to notice what is going on with our bodies, we will find valuable information in attending to the other person's nonverbal behavior. Their body will tell us whether there is congruence between what they say and how they really feel. Are they smiling while they are talking about very painful material? Are they saying everything is under control while they fidget with their hair or nails? If there are discrepancies between what they are saying and what their body is telling you, those discrepancies are likely to be blockages which impede their growth and healing and they are very valuable information for you to have.

You must be very careful about whether or how you share this information with them. People become very self-conscious when they realize they are being seen more clearly than they may want to be. If you do try to talk to them about their nonverbal behavior,

it should be done in a very gentle, supportive way, asking questions, rather than asserting truth.

I guess the bottom line to all of this is that we need to give the same thing all of us want, and what many of us have difficulty giving ourselves: a respectful, caring presence, a belief that this person will find a way to deal with their dilemma. They may need some help, some information, a hand along the way; we all do. But in safely and supportively sharing themselves with another, they will find themselves.

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