

Listening between the lines

TYPE: Introductory discussion

ESTIMATED TRAINING TIME: 15 minutes

THEME: Effective listening

OBJECTIVES:

- ➔ to explore the differences between “active” and “empathic” listening;
- ➔ to identify ways to demonstrate empathic listening to others.

MATERIALS NEEDED: Flip chart

PROCEDURE:

Ask participants to define active listening and list their responses on the flip chart. Then point out that active listening involves the following.

- ➔ “Attending” skills – demonstrating that you’re listening by positioning yourself at eye level with the speaker, leaning forward, giving direct and warm eye contact, and avoiding blocking behaviors, such as crossed arms or legs.
- ➔ “Following” skills – nodding, asking an occasional brief question (“Really? What happened next?”) or inserting a brief comment or sound (“Hmmm. That must have been painful”) to show the speaker that you’re following the message.
- ➔ “Reflective” skills – reflecting the speaker’s meaning, either by paraphrasing your understanding of their feelings (“You felt hurt when he said that”) or their meaning (“You would have preferred a more direct response from her”). Note that reflective responses have two purposes: they help to ensure accuracy because the speaker can correct you if you’ve misunderstood, and they often result in the speaker expounding on their comments to further explain – thus giving you more information.

Next, ask participants, “What is the difference between active and empathic listening?” While some are likely to respond that the terms are synonymous, point out that empathy requires a deeper level of listening that involves attention to the emotional subtext of the speaker’s comments. As commonly described, this form of listening involves “listening between the lines” or “listening with the heart.”

DEBRIEFING:

- 1 What are some general guidelines for being a better empathic listener? (Try to avoid being judgmental; consider the speaker's verbal and nonverbal behaviors to tune in to feelings as well as thoughts; to the extent possible, try to put yourself in the speaker's position; and demonstrate compassion and understanding in your nonverbal responses – particularly with your eyes and other facial expressions.)
- 2 As you listen with empathy, what are examples of responses to avoid? (Don't say: "I know exactly how you feel," as no one can ever know exactly how another feels. Instead, you might say, "I've had a similar experience." Another taboo: "You shouldn't be upset about that." Everyone has the right to feel the way they feel. Accept their feelings as legitimate. Talk people through their emotions – not out of them.)
- 3 What are some examples of occasions when you should use empathic listening with patients, colleagues, or others? (A patient is describing a recent death in the family; a colleague is upset because she lost her mother's ring; a coworker is excited because she became engaged the night before. Point out that empathic listening involves tuning in to all types of emotion: sadness as well as happiness, and the myriad emotions in-between.)
- 4 Under what circumstances would you listen actively rather than empathically? (Examples include: taking histories that do not involve emotional components; hearing factual reports – whenever the emotional subtext does not outweigh the factual content.)
- 5 Is there such a thing as being *too* empathic? Should there be at least some emotional detachment in order to avoid becoming too emotionally invested or involved in the speaker's feelings and tribulations? Please explain.
- 6 What are the advantages of empathic listening in health care settings? How does empathic listening affect the quality of your professional and personal relationships?