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Active Listening Skills

Active Listening Skills (ALS) are invaluable communication tools, providing an individual with the ability to communicate effectively in settings such as counseling, negotiations, and conflict resolution. Like anything else though, these skills take effort and practice to maintain proficiency.

Active listening involves listening with all your senses. This involves eye contact, body posture, tone, and facial expression. Listening is an active process by which you are trying to understand the real meaning of what the speaker is trying to convey.

Listening is one of the most fundamental components of interpersonal communication skills. It is a process by which you attempt to gather information from another person to fully understand what is being conveyed. As a “listener” you should generally remain neutral and non-judgmental. This allows the speaker to fully address their concerns without fear of embarrassment or reprisal. This doesn’t mean you are there just to sit and listen. You are taking an active part in understanding what the issues are. Listening is a fluid process with multiple elements taking place. Enough time should be allowed to ensure true meanings, feelings and emotions are explored and understood.

Below is a list of Active Listening Skills discussed in greater detail.

Minimal Encouragers: Simple verbal actions such as “mmm,” “okay,” and “I see,” and nonverbal gestures like head nodding establish the building of rapport with the person with whom you are communicating. Using these subtle techniques invites the person to continue speaking. Words such as these - “Oh”, “Wow”, “Really” - let the speaker know you are paying attention, yet they don’t interrupt the conversation flow. If you begin interrupting the speaker, it appears to them that you are saying, “What I have to say is more important,” or, “I’m more important than you,” and communication will begin to disintegrate.

Emotional Labeling: This is often the first ALS to be used in a crisis situation. It is important for the emotions of the person speaking to be acknowledged. Identifying the person's emotions validates, rather than minimizes, what they are feeling. During a negotiation, people can act with their emotions and not from a more cognitive perspective (using their evaluative, reasoning, and judgment skills.) By labeling and acknowledging their emotions, it helps restore the balance.

- You sound angry...
- You sound like you're in a lot of pain...
- You seem...

Paraphrasing: This skill is repeating what the person said in a much shorter format using your own words, while also not minimizing what the person has experienced. This ALS usually begins with the words, "Are you telling me...?" or "Are you saying...?". Paraphrasing clarifies content, builds rapport and highlights issues.

"I" Messages: This is used to *counteract* statements made by the person that are not conducive towards working collaboratively. The active listener states, "I feel_____ when you _____ because _____." Using this ALS provides a "timeout" or reality check to the other person letting them know you are trying to work together and they, from your perspective, are not. *It is important to be mindful when using this ALS as to not do it in a way (be aware of your tone) that is aggressive and creates an argument.*

Summarization: Summarizing is an extended version of paraphrasing. It is *wrapping up* everything the person said, including the elements important to the person as well as acknowledging the person's emotions. Summarizing validates for the person that they have been heard and understood. This is critical to do as it can bring a sense of relief to the person and reduce their actions being dictated by their emotions.

Summarizing is also a valuable tool for a negotiator to use when he or she is unsure what to do or say next. Summarizing what the person has said brings multiple benefits. First, it buys you time and as already stated, slowing the process down is an important element that contributes to a peaceful resolution.

Second, summarizing allows the negotiator to build rapport and develop trust. Rapport and trust then allows the negotiator to eventually move towards influencing the person to reappraise their situation and consider alternatives to a resolution and suggestions from the negotiator.

Reflecting/Mirroring: When the person is finished speaking, reflecting and mirroring is a much shorter option compared to paraphrasing as it includes repeating the last words the person said. If the person concluded by saying, "...and this really made me angry," you would say, "It really made you angry."

Some trainers suggest reflecting/mirroring should be limited to strictly repeating no more than 3-4 of the last words spoken by a person. At first use, it may seem odd to use this ALS, but it helps validate with the speaker that you are listening and understanding. This technique is especially useful when you are at a loss for words.

Effective Pauses/Silence: This ALS is described as dynamic inactivity. Most people are uncomfortable with silence and soon begin to talk. Again, remember, calming the situation is critical as it helps move the person from acting out of their emotions to a mindset that is more cognitive based. A great way to use this technique is before or after something very meaningful is stated.

Open-ended Questions: Asking open-ended questions invites the person to speak longer and it can help diffuse the tension as well as provide you valuable information and insight into their perspective of the situation. Generally, refrain from “Why” questions as these tend to place blame and can shut down communication. Suggestions include:

- Could you tell me...
- I’m wondering...
- Can you expand on that?
- What would you like to see different about your situation?
- I’d really like to hear what’s been going on with you.

Validations:

The intent of this ALS is to support what the individual is going through - really, to “normalize” their situation. This allows them to understand that others have dealt with similar situations. The idea is that the individual may start to feel they are not all alone and not the only person to ever have gone through what they are experiencing, which can have a calming effect.

- That’s a difficult situation.
- That’s a lot for one person to handle.
- It’s not abnormal to feel the way you are, given the circumstances.
- There’s no wonder that.....
- Many people would feel_____ in the same situation.

Normalization: Normalization is a process where the individual’s feelings or actions would be considered normal under the conditions they are currently in. It puts a person’s feelings into perspective. When a person feels they are the only one in the world struggling with issues, normalization helps put that person’s concern into perspective. Dr. Shawn Shea discusses normalization in length and spells it out brilliantly. “Sometimes

when people are as depressed as you've been feeling they find themselves have thoughts of killing themselves; have you been having any thoughts like that?"

Gratitude: To fully commit to expressing what you've truly been thinking and feeling when struggling takes courage and trust in the listener. After listening to what has been entrusted to you, a simple phrase such as, "Thank you very much for talking to me about what's been going on with you. I realize that was not easy for you to do." You are validating the individual and reinforcing the rapport you have built.

Last Thoughts

Clearly, listening is a skill we can all benefit from by improving. By becoming a better listener, you will improve your ability to influence, persuade and negotiate. Remember to be in the moment, be aware of subtle changes in body language, tone of voice, and be tolerant of silence. The mere fact you are there for the individual without want for yourself and with unconditional acceptance may be all that is needed to help the person get through a crisis and on a path to recovery.