

Attachment and Experiential Therapy, LLC

Active Listening

Active Listening Goal – to build right relationships; to build emotional intimacy

Principles –

- People feel “connected” to others who take time to accept, validate and understand their internal experiences
- People feel “disconnected” and/or “dismissed” when people either purposely or inadvertently deny, void or do not listen to their internal experiences (i.e. their unique feeling perspective). This happens when people use reasons/logic as a response to a person’s emotional reaction. It also happens when people purposely or inadvertently impose their perspective on someone else.
- People who are “reactive” are not operating from the logical portion of their brains; this means that it is best to respond to them with active listening to feelings (i.e. to understand their internal experiences/ their perspective) rather than moving to logically problem-solve. Of course, there is always a need and time for problem-solving but when someone is highly emotive (i.e. not-rational) it is best to wait to use reasoning (rational thinking).
- People who are behaving in a reactive manner have been triggered by something in the present but are operating “as if” what was true for them in the past is happening in the now. This is particularly true with trauma. It is important to be present with the reactive person and invite them to share their internal perspectives without them feeling discounted/shamed etc. This allows them to feel emotionally safe, increases their tolerance for distress and ultimately to add “new evidence” (e.g. that they are worthy of love even though their childhood “template” says that they are “junk” or “at fault” etc.)
- People feel secure and heard when others ACCEPT, UNDERSTAND and VALIDATE them. Agreement is not required; hence, we can agree to disagree.
- It is helpful to remember that reactive people are being defensive; i.e. they are defending some inner woundedness. People reactively defend in 4 basic ways (with lots of variations in each type). People use attack defenses (e.g. yelling, sarcasm, ridicule, labeling, dismissing, verbal venom, hitting and more); self-attack (e.g. playing the victim, self-harming etc.); avoidance (e.g. being emotionally unavailable, being tolerant of all things/being a doormat, using substances, procrastinating, gambling, porn etc.); and withdrawal (e.g. punishing by pulling away/ withdrawing love).
- It is important to remember that people sometimes use a variety of these reactive defenses and some people just repeatedly use a few. For example, a person who uses avoidance may regularly procrastinate but never use substances.
- Reactive defenses are created during period of childhood development as survival adaptations at a time when there was no other way for the child to feel safe. Since we are in a fallen world, we can recognize that such defenses arise out of the woundedness of parents etc. Thus, it is useless to blame. It is important to compassionately understand and meet someone where they

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are at in their woundedness so that they can be safely invited back and build right relationship with your higher power, others and self.

- Active listening skills are those that do not impose one person's perspective on another person (i.e. it is not "the world according to me is the way it is for everyone"). Active listening utilizes "clean language"; i.e. language that is authentic, accountable for the way a person feels and invites the other person to share what it is like for that person as well. It involves "give and take" with each person wondering what it is like for the other person (not just waiting for a turn to be heard).

Active Listening Skills include:

"I" statements – these allow the person to be accountable and authentic. It is perfectly fine to say "I am angry when I feel dismissed" or "I am confused when I see these behaviors" etc. These statements reflect the point of view of the speaker without blaming the other person. Consider how different those statements are from "You" statements such as "You make me so mad" or "You dismiss me" (these statements put the speaker in the "victim" position and are critical of the other person).

"What" and "How" questions – these types of questions invite the other person to better describe the emotions that are being felt (instead of why questions which elicit reasons; people feel dismissed/distressed when they need to find a "good reason" to be upset instead of being compassionately being heard and invited to discuss what is bothering them).

"Tell me more" – this type of statement is another invitation to the other person to express the concern.

"Seems like" or "sounds like" – reflective statements that provide the speaker with feedback about how it appears to the listener (so that misunderstandings, if any, can be identified, clarifications can be made etc.)

"I wonder" – a special kind of guiding statement that helps the other person think in the direction the speaker wants

There are many variations of the above active listening skills. The important thing to remember is that you want to elicit the perspective of the other person and not impose your perspective on the other person. You can discuss your authentic points of view; you do not need to agree. When people safely accept, understand and validate each other, we cease to feel alone because we know someone else "gets" us.... And that feels great when the other person truly "gets me" and still chooses to care/love/be with the "real me" ... the me without pretense, defenses and with all the imperfections that go along with being human.

Here are types of statements that may accidentally hurt/rupture relationships:

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“You” statements – feel attacking/blaming

Blame – feels critical “You make me” and “It makes me feel” types of statements

Labels

Judgments

Sarcasm

All or nothing statements

Catastrophizing

Mind reading – “I know exactly what you mean” etc. (no one knows what anyone means unless we actively listen)

Fortune-telling

Needing to be right

Power struggles

Perfectionism

The list goes on and on... best to focus on building active listening skills and work on how to make a repair when something hurtful is said.

Repairs

The easiest way to make a repair is to simply say something such as “Oops! My mistake... I am sorry... what I meant was_____”

People need to get good at making repairs and accepting them.

The easiest way to accept a repair is to say something such as “Good... I am glad to hear it because I felt hurt by the other remark”.

When individuals do not practice active listening or making/accepting repairs, it may be best to discontinue the discussion until participants can be calm and accountable for their words.

Pauses in discussions can be requested by saying something such as “I am unable to participate in this discussion when I hear those words ... I am not rejecting you...I need a break”.

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