

Being Understood

The best way to ensure someone is being understood is through the classic way of listening called “active listening.” It’s called “active” because you don’t sit and listen passively. In other words, you make eye contact, you nod, you are curious, you ask clarifying questions and you summarize what the other person is saying throughout their sharing. Almost like being a para-professional counselor.

And, of course, you must reflect the emotion under the story. Without that part, you are not really having an intimate conversation. This type of listening is very helpful, soothing, and it helps people stay calm. Pain and anger in a relationship can do so much damage--it leads to attacking and defending and pulling away. It’s why so many therapists teach “active listening” as a survival tool for conflict. But why does it work?

There is great pain in not being understood. In my therapy office I regularly see people calm down with a visible relaxing and a big sigh when they are fully understood--often they cry tears of relief.

But what does it mean to be understood? Imagine a two-year old throwing a tantrum out of any number of frustrations and you can see the pain of not getting what we want. All a tantrum is, really, is not getting what we want. In much of our communication we may not be aware that what we want is simply to be understood, to be heard. When we are understood, conflict melts away because the emotional intensity melts away.

The goal in “active listening” is to fully understand someone when they send a message. This helps them not get fired up and frustrated, but instead they can calm down. You must have the strength to set your issues aside and listen to the other person without getting triggered yourself. Sometimes it isn’t easy, but it is necessary, and usually the best thing you can do. You can always tell your side, or argue later, but for the moment, hold on to yourself and listen. This is what someone in customer service does with a disgruntled customer.

In order to understand another, we must find a way to get the depth, breadth, meaning and feelings in the message being sent. Peter Pearson, Ph.D., from The Couples Institute says you need to grasp the “significance, importance or implication” of a message. In any case, you can just mentally go through a list of depth, breadth, meaning, feelings, significance, importance or implication and search for the answers to them. Then, tell the person what you heard. If you get it right, they will relax and sigh or something similar. You can 1) ask, “I think the feelings under what you’re saying are...” 2) restate the content of what you think you heard, or 3) ask clarifying questions. After you have responded, be sure to ask them if there is anything else. Don’t forget this, because it usually draws out one more point they have forgotten.

Courtesy of:



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