

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Thomas Gordon, in a series of well-known texts, among them *Teacher Effectiveness Training* and *Parent Effectiveness Training*, developed the model of **active listening**. Though relatively simple in theory, active listening demands discipline, practice and hard work. **His thesis is that people, while purporting to hear each other, are actually often not listening at all. They simply haven't been trained in the skills - the art - of how to be an effective listener.** For many people listening is hearing the word of another and then verbally responding. Gordon says that is not enough. **Effective listening is a powerful affirmation of acceptance of another person.**

When a person is able to feel and communicate genuine acceptance of another, he possesses a capacity for being a powerful helping agent for another. His acceptance of the other, as he is, is an important factor in fostering a relationship in which the other person can grow, develop, make constructive changes, learn to solve problems, move in the direction of psychological health, become more productive and creative, and actualize his fullest potential.

Gordon talks about the paradox that "When a person feels that he is truly accepted by another, as he is, then he is freed to move from there and begin to think about how he wants to change, how he wants to grow, how he can become different, how he might become more of what he is capable of being." **This acceptance is vital and critical to a support program.** While people will often be very different in economic, cultural and racial background, what they all want to is to be heard, to be taken seriously, and personally valued in the process. To not receive this acceptance is a form of personal rejection, and the participant will most likely not feel welcomed or desirous of being group members.

Gordon discusses the major errors of **non-listening**. Though often seen **helpful on the surface, they often send the message that one does not have the ability or capacity to solve one's own problems or make positive personal decisions.** Therefore, advice is not always helpful support. **Such ineffective listening creates resistance and resentment, often producing the feeling of being "put down."** Gordon talks about the roadblocks to effective listening:

ROADBLOCKS TO LISTENING

- **Ordering, Directing, Commanding**
"You should stop worrying about your child so much. You would feel much better if you did."
- **Warning, Admonishing, Threatening**
"With your child's profound disability, your marriage will get really stressed out. I'd consider foster care if I were you."
- **Exhorting, Preaching, Moralizing**
"You know far more than health professionals do. Never let them tell you what to do."
- **Advising, Giving Suggestions or Solutions**
"You need to change doctors. He doesn't give you any assistance, and I don't see why you stay with him."
- **Judging, Criticizing, Blaming**
"You are just too easy on your kid. She needs to be pushed harder. Get tougher!"
- **Name-calling, Ridiculing, Shaming**
"You are really a jerk when you act that way. None of the rest of the men in this group treat their families the way you do."
- **Interpreting, Diagnosing, Psychoanalyzing**
"You let your own guilt get in the way of being helpful to your child. I can see it all over your face. You need help."
- **Teaching, Instructing**
"Here's how to talk to your child's special education teacher. It really does work and you'll get better results this way."
- **Praising or Agreeing**
"You handle tough situations so well. I wish I had the strength you do."
- **Reassuring, Sympathizing or Consoling**
"You and your wife will get through this period of stress. We've all faced it and we've all done okay."
- **Probing, Questioning, or Interrogating**
"What is it about your child that makes you so confused and angry?"
- **Withdrawing, Distracting, Humoring, or Diverting**
"Don't worry about it. Go to a movie, take a break, and you'll find the issues won't seem so serious later on."

All of us have used these responses and styles of communication; some have even produced positive results. Yet, such responses most often fail to empower or produce effective problem-solving, where a person considers for himself what is the most appropriate decision she/he needs to make. Too often the above responses produce confusion, guilt,

frustration and anger, and a sense that one is not being taken seriously. Effective communication and listening builds rather than limits, assists rather than denies.

Gordon talks about positive modes of interaction. **He places particular emphasis on the use of "I" messages rather than "You" messages**, which often produce blame, rebellion and accompanying defensiveness. Examples include: "You stop that," "You shouldn't do that," "Don't you ever ...," "If you don't stop that, then ...," "Why don't you do this?," "You are wrong," "You are acting immaturely," "You want attention," and "You should know better than that."

Changing the pronoun from "You" to "I" changes the tone of the conversation. It asks all parties to "own" their messages, their problems, their ideas and feelings. The message is no longer evaluative but rather a statement of fact. "You are a problem" becomes "I am very tired and it is difficult for me to really listen to you today." Gordon comments: "I" messages are infinitely more effective because they place responsibility within the child (parent, group member) for modifying his behavior." They help people grow. "I" messages are most often reciprocated with "I" messages.

Also helpful is paraphrasing and re-stating what one hears another say. This not only assists effective listening, but also lets the speaker know he has been taken seriously. **Be careful to avoid trite responses such as "What I hear you saying is ..."** Such comments stop communication. Paraphrasing should be natural, not forced, and only done for further clarification or understanding:

- "It sounds as if your frustration regarding your son's poor schooling really gets in the way of your concentrating at work."
- "What you would like is more time for yourself; you don't have much privacy or places you can relax."
- "Am I correct in assuming you are stuck between a rock and a hard place? While you want improved therapies for your child, you don't want to jeopardize your family's financial well being to get the help he needs."

Gordon talks about **"door openers," invitations for the speaker to say more, to continue talking.** "These are responses that do not communicate any of the listener's own ideas or judgments or feelings, yet they invite the

speaker to share his own ideas, judgments or feelings." They open the door to communication:

"I see"

"You don't say"

"How about that"

"Really"

"Mm Hmmm"

"You did, huh?"

"Oh"

"No fooling"

"Interesting"

Other texts for further understanding of these concepts as well as principles of group dynamics:

Gordon, Thomas. *Parent Effectiveness Training*, Peter H. Wyden, Inc., New York, N.Y., 1971

Johnson, David W. & Johnson, Frank P. *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1991

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"I" LANGUAGE

"I" Language is a method of expressing your own feelings, thoughts or beliefs without being critical or blaming others.

"I" Language:

- starts with the pronoun "I"
- is preferred over the pronoun "You" which may infer blame or judgment
- expresses how we think or feel
- is clear and simple

Examples: I think
 I feel
 I believe
 I need
 I want

"I disagree."	NOT	"You are wrong."
"I need help."	NOT	"Start helping me now."
"I feel angry when you do that"	NOT	"You drive me crazy."