

COMMUNICATION

If You Really Want to Be Heard, Shut Up...

...And recognize the real struggle with your partner is to hear

IF I HAD A DOLLAR for every time I heard a new client say, “We need help learning to communicate,” I’d be retired by now. (Scratch that—I love what I do.) Yet, learning to communicate is rarely the real issue for most couples. Most clients are capable communicators; in fact, many talk *too* much. The real issue is that they haven’t learned to *listen*.

I recently saw a greeting card that explained the problem like this:

I’m usually done hearing people before they finish because I’m a fast listener.

If we’re honest with ourselves, most of us will admit that we tend to fill in the blanks of our partner’s patter, imagining we know what they’re thinking or feeling. Some other common listening filters are:

- Listening to gather evidence
- Listening to prove the self inferior/superior
- Listening to find holes in the speaker’s logic
- Listening to fix a perceived problem
- Listening for approval
- Listening for an entry point to change the subject

≡ Listen
Jennifer Davis



Listen for the Longing in the Words

When we approach our partner with such filters in place, chances are we'll end up in an ego skirmish. This is why so many "We need to talk" scenarios get louder with no one listening at all.

THE STRUGGLE TO HEAR

There's a paradox when it comes to relating: In order to connect authentically with another's essence, we must be willing to engage with their ego. I think of the ego as a sentry to the deeper chambers of another's heart. As a primary protector of our tender selves, the ego is masterful at creating obstacles and diversions. So, as with any hero's journey, it takes fortitude to traverse another's multilayered egoic landscape of resistance, blame, and epic stories in order to gain entry into their inner sanctum.

This requires centering yourself and adopting an attitude of respectful curiosity. I invite Deep Listeners to imagine that they are social anthropologists on assignment in a foreign world—their partner's. Their job is to comprehend this world as accurately as possible and to discover what is most precious to its inhabitant. To this end, they train themselves to reflect back what they are hearing to ensure that their understanding is accurate.

Words are very important to the egoic mind, so if you skip over important words—or worse, reinterpret the ego's story—chances are it will react or retreat. You will likely be tested to ensure that you are worthy of an audience with the speaker's most vulnerable parts, so be prepared to navigate through several ego strata.

Reflecting accurately what someone is saying does not mean you agree. It simply means you comprehend their point of view. So don't skip on reflecting another's words back to them. It may feel awkward at first, but eventually something magical happens: The speaker begins to reveal themselves more deeply—to them as well as to you. Often they are able to connect some vital dots in resolving an issue that's been bothering them.

While you are respectfully giving the ego its due, you are also picking up on cues through your own body about what your partner is feeling and silently empathizing with them. Maybe your partner is expressing frustration about their work, yet you keep tuning in to anxiety or a sense of loneliness. Allow yourself to feel beneath the surface of their words, but don't offer your insights. The time for that—if at all—is after they are fully expressed in their sharing.

Deep Listening is a generous act, akin to inviting someone to a leisurely picnic in the sun when you've both been used to a steady diet of drive-thru fast food. The best part is that you will both feel nourished from the experience.

—JOY HOSEY

I encourage couples to practice Deep Listening on different days (as opposed to back to back). Allot at least 45 minutes—you may use less, but spaciousness supports the process. Be sure you have an agreed-upon signal that alerts the speaker that the listener is "full" and needs the speaker to pause so they can repeat back what's been said.

LISTENER: Open the practice with centering breaths and adopt an attitude of respectful curiosity. Extend the invitation "I'd really love to know what's going on in your world, if you're willing to share."

SPEAKER: Share whatever is arising in the moment, ideally noticing not just your thoughts, but your body sensations and feelings, too.

LISTENER: Reflect back to the speaker what you've heard them say as accurately as possible, then ask, "Is there anything else?" This is the primary question you will ask throughout the process. If you lose a piece of the story, don't ask the speaker to repeat it. Listen for the longing embedded in your partner's words, not just the surface content (but stay with them on the content).

SPEAKER: If your partner misses a piece that's important, let them know that and repeat it for them.

Repeat this process until the speaker feels heard. Then take a few breaths to discover if there is anything else the speaker wants to be acknowledged—no matter how trivial. It becomes obvious when the speaker is fully expressed: They will feel relaxed and appreciative.

LISTENER: Now you can engage in a three-part process I've dubbed "gestalt empathy" where you share your heart and body responses to what you've heard.

1. "I imagine you're feeling..."
2. "I imagine what you really want is..."
3. "I can relate to what you shared about _____. I have a similar experience in my world."

End the practice with each partner appreciating the other.