

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

So Were You Really Listening?

from the American Counseling Association

We all believe we're good listeners. We like to think that when someone close to us has something to tell us, that we really pay attention and understand what's being said. But experts say that often isn't the case for a number of reasons.

Sometimes we're poor listeners because it's a basic human desire to want to swap stories. As a result we interrupt, trying to hurry the speaker along so that we can get to our own story. It's more interesting to talk about ourselves, right?

Emotions can also be uncomfortable, our own and those of others, and yet that's what many serious discussions tend to focus on.

Experts also report there's something called "listener burnout." Most of us have known someone who drones on and on about the same old problems. Our tendency then is to offer quick advice that will hopefully fix the problem and stop the endless story.

Listening well is an important skill in any close relationship and it's a skill we can all improve.

Start by learning to recognize when someone close to you really wants to talk. There will usually be signals and hints that something is bothering him or her. That's when it's time to give your undivided attention.

Let the other person disclose what is troubling, and then acknowledge that you recognize this as a legitimate problem or experience. If you dismiss or minimize what has been said, or if you argue about details, it's likely the conversation will end.

A key element is to encourage the other person to elaborate on what has happened or is so troubling. A good way is to ask open ended questions that show you want to hear and understand the whole story.

You can also show your interest by paraphrasing what has been said and asking if you're hearing and understand the issue correctly. As you become involved like this, it not only lets the other person know that you care, but also opens the door to being able to work together on possible solutions to whatever has caused the problem.

Yes, it's more in our nature to want to focus on ourselves and air out our own problems, but if you truly love and care for someone, it's important to learn to listen to and help with the problems he or she is facing.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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