

1

“Did You Hear What I Said?”

WHY LISTENING IS SO IMPORTANT

Sometimes it seems that we’re all so preoccupied that nobody listens anymore.

“He expects me to listen to his problems, but he never asks about mine.”

“She can’t remember what I’ve told her because she’s always busy with something else.”

“She often doesn’t answer my texts, but she gets upset when she doesn’t get an immediate response from me.”

“The only time I find out what’s going on in his life is when I overhear him telling someone else. Why doesn’t he tell *me* these things?”

“I can’t talk to her because she’s so critical.”

Wives complain that their husbands take them for granted. Husbands complain that their wives take forever to get to the point.

She feels a violation of their connection. He doesn’t trust the connection.

Few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood. Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our feelings are recognized, and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters.

The urge to be heard is a longing to escape our isolation and bridge the space that separates us. We reach out and try to overcome that separateness by revealing what's on our minds and in our hearts, hoping for understanding. Getting that understanding should be simple, but it isn't.

Joan saw a suit she'd like to buy for work, but wasn't sure she should spend the money. "Honey," she said, "I saw a really nice suit at the outlet store."

"That's nice," Henry said, and went back to his iPad.

Sanjay was upset about having had a fender bender, but he was afraid that if he said anything Denise would get on his case about it. So he kept quiet and worried about how he was going to get it fixed. Denise felt Sanjay's distance and assumed that he was angry at her for something. She didn't feel like having an argument, so she didn't say anything either.

The essence of good listening is empathy, which can only be achieved by suspending our preoccupation with ourselves and entering into the experience of the other person. Part intuition and part effort, it's the stuff of human connection. And, maybe paradoxically, these days it seems that the more ways we have to communicate, the less we seem able to find the time for conversation.

A listener's empathy—grasping what we're trying to say *and showing it*—builds a bond of understanding, linking us to someone who hears us and cares, and thus confirms that our feelings are legitimate and comprehensible. The power of empathic listening is the power to transform relationships. When deeply felt but unexpressed feelings take shape in words that are voiced and come back clarified, the result is a reassuring sense of being understood and a grateful feeling of shared humanness.

.....
The art of listening is critical to successful relationships.
.....

If listening strengthens our relationships by cementing our connection with one another, it also fortifies our sense of self. In the presence of a

receptive listener, we are able to clarify what we think and discover what we feel. Thus, in giving an account of our experience to someone who listens, we are better able to listen to ourselves. Our lives are defined in dialogue.

It Hurts Not to Be Listened To

The need to be taken seriously and understood is frustrated every day. Adults complain that their children and partners don't listen. Children complain that their parents are too busy scolding them to hear their side of things. Even friends, usually a reliable source of shared understanding, are often too busy to listen to one another these days. And if we sometimes feel cut off from sympathy and understanding in the private sphere, we've grown not even to expect courtesy and attention in public settings.

Our right to be heard is violated in countless ways that we don't always remember, by others who don't always realize. That doesn't make it any less frustrating.

When I told a psychiatrist friend that I was collecting experiences on the theme "It hurts not to be listened to," he sent me this example:

"I called a friend and left a message asking if we could meet at a particular time. He didn't answer, and I felt a little anxious and confused. Should I call again to remind him? After all, I know he's busy. Should I wait another day or two and hope he'll answer? Should I not have asked him in the first place? All this leaves me uneasy."

The first thing that struck me about this example was how even a little thing like an unanswered phone message can leave someone feeling unresponded to—and troubled. Then I was really struck—like a slap in the face—by the realization that my friend was talking about me! Suddenly I was embarrassed, and then defensive. The reason I hadn't returned his call—doesn't matter. (We always have reasons for not responding.) What matters is how my failure to respond hurt and confused my friend and that I never had any inkling of it.

If an oversight like that can hurt, how much more painful is it when the subject is of urgent importance to the speaker?

Listening is so basic that we take it for granted.
Unfortunately, most of us think of ourselves
as better listeners than we really are.

When you come home from a business trip, eager to tell your partner how it went, and he listens but after a minute or two something in his eyes goes to sleep, you feel hurt and betrayed. When you call your parents to share a triumph and they don't seem really interested, you feel deflated and perhaps foolish for having allowed yourself to even hope for appreciation.

Just as it hurts not to be listened to when you're excited about something special, it's painful not to feel listened to by someone special, someone you expect to care about you.

Jalen's best friend in college was Derek. They were both political science majors and shared a passion for politics. Together they followed every revelation of congressional dysfunction, relishing unfolding news items as though they were a series of deliciously wicked Charles Addams cartoons. But as much as they took cynical delight in examples of hypocrisy and folly in Washington, their friendship went beyond politics.

Jalen remembered the wonderful feeling of talking to Derek for hours, impelled by the momentum of some deep and inexplicable sympathy. There was the pleasure of being able to say anything he wanted, and the pleasure of hearing Derek say everything he'd always thought but never expressed. Unlike Jalen's other friends, Derek wasn't a competitive conversationalist. He really listened.

When they went to graduate schools in different cities, they kept up their friendship. Jalen would visit Derek, or Derek would visit Jalen, at least once a month. They'd play pool or see a movie and go out for Chinese food; and then afterward, no matter how late it got, they'd stay up talking.

Then Derek got married, and things changed. Derek didn't become distant the way some friends do after marriage, nor did Derek's wife dislike Jalen. The distance Jalen felt was subtle, but it made a big difference.

"It's difficult to describe exactly, but I often end up feeling awkward and disappointed when I speak with Derek. He listens . . . but somehow he

doesn't seem really interested anymore. He doesn't ask questions. He used to be so involved. It makes me sad. I still feel excited about the things going on in my life, but telling Derek just makes me feel unconnected and alone with them."

Jalen's lament says something important about listening. It isn't just not being interrupted that we want. Sometimes people appear to be listening but aren't really hearing. Some people are good at being silent when we talk. Sometimes they betray their lack of interest by glancing around, checking their phones, and shifting their weight back and forth. At other times, however, listeners show no sign of inattention, but still we know they aren't really hearing what we have to say. It feels like they don't care.

Derek's passive interest was especially painful to Jalen because of the closeness they'd shared. The friends had reached an impasse; Jalen couldn't open himself to his friend the way he'd done in the past, and Derek was mystified by the distance that had grown between them.

Friendship is voluntary, and so talking about it is optional. Jalen didn't want to complain to Derek or make demands. Besides, how does one guy tell another that he feels no longer cared about? And so Jalen never did talk to Derek about feeling estranged. Too bad, because when a relationship goes sour, talking about it may be the only way to make things right again.

.....
It's especially hurtful not to be listened to
in those relationships we count on for understanding.
.....

After a while most of us learn to do a pretty good imitation of being grownups and shrug off a lot of slights and misunderstandings. If, in the process, we become a little calloused, well maybe that's the price you pay for getting along in the world. But sometimes not being responded to leaves us feeling so hurt and angry that it can make us retreat from relationships, even for years.

When a woman discovered that her husband was having an affair, she felt as if someone had kicked her in the gut. In her grief and anger, she turned to the person she was closest to—her sister-in-law, whom she

considered her best friend. The sister-in-law tried to be understanding and supportive, but it was, after all, hard to listen to the bitter statements about her brother. Still, she tried. Apparently, however, the support she offered wasn't enough. Eventually the crisis passed and the couple reconciled, but the woman, feeling that her sister-in-law hadn't been there when she needed her, never spoke to her again.

The sister-in-law in this sad story was baffled by her friend's stubborn silence. Other people's reactions often seem unreasonable to us. What makes their reactions reasonable *to them* is feeling wounded by a lack of responsiveness.

To listen is to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved . . . appreciate. Listening is so central to human existence as to often escape notice; or, rather, it appears in so many guises that it's seldom recognized as the overarching need that it is. Sometimes, as Jalen, the estranged sister-in-law, and so many others have discovered, we don't realize how important being listened to is until we feel cheated out of it.

Once in a while, however, we become aware of how much it means to be listened to. You can't decide whether or not to take a new job, and so you call an old friend to talk it over. She doesn't tell you what to do, but the fact that she listens, really listens, helps you see things more clearly. Another time you're just getting to know someone, but you like him so much that after a wonderful dinner in a restaurant you take a risk and ask him over for coffee. When he says, "No thanks, I've got to get up early," you feel rejected. Convinced that he doesn't like you, you start avoiding him. After a few days, however, he asks you what's wrong, and once again you take a risk and tell him that your feelings were hurt. To your great relief, instead of arguing, he listens and accepts what you have to say. "I can see how you might have felt that way, but actually I would like to see you again."

Why can't it always be that way? I speak, you listen. It's that simple, isn't it? Unfortunately, no. Talking and listening create a unique relationship in which speaker and listener are constantly switching roles, both jockeying for position, each one's needs competing with the other's. If you doubt this, try telling someone about a problem you're having and see how long it takes before he interrupts to describe a similar experience of his own or to offer advice—advice that may suit him more than it does you.

A man in therapy was exploring his relationship with his distant father when he suddenly remembered the happy times they'd spent together playing with his electric trains. It was a Lionel set that had been his father's and grandfather's before him. Caught up in the memory, the man grew increasingly excited as he recalled the pride he'd felt in sharing this family tradition with his father. As the man's enthusiasm mounted, the therapist launched into a long story about *his* train set and how he had gotten the other kids in the neighborhood to bring over their tracks and train cars to build a huge neighborhood setup in his basement. After the therapist had gone on at some length, the patient could no longer contain his anger about being cut off. "Why are you telling me about *your* trains?!" he demanded. The therapist hesitated; then, with that level, impersonal voice we reserve for confiding something intimate, he said lamely, "I was just trying to be friendly."

.....
It takes two people to share a feeling—
one to talk and one to listen.
.....

The therapist had made an all-too-common mistake (actually he'd made several, but this is Be Kind to Therapists Week). He assumed that sharing his own experience was the equivalent of empathy. In fact, though, he switched the focus to himself, making his patient feel discounted, misunderstood, unappreciated. That's what hurt. It might have even been more distressing because therapists are paid to listen empathically; however, the experience of invalidation is awful no matter who is co-opting the conversation.

As is often the way with words that become familiar, *empathy* may not adequately convey the power of appreciating the inner experience of another person. Empathic listening is like the close reading of a poem; it takes in the words and gets to what's behind them. The difference is that while empathy is actively imaginative, it is fundamentally receptive rather than creative. When we attend to a work of art, our idiosyncratic response has its own validity, but when we attend to someone who's trying to tell us something, it's understanding their feelings, not creativity, that counts.

Bearing Witness

Listening has not one but two purposes: taking in information and bearing witness to another's experience. When people tell you about their lives, it is reasonable to assume that they expect you to pay attention and perhaps offer a supportive response. Of course, this seemingly simple personal exchange still poses plenty of challenges. But now we are also asking people to listen to us through a variety of social media—texts, images, posts, blogs, tweets, and shares—offering so many more ways to bear witness to the experiences of others but also to let each other down by not responding sufficiently, if we respond at all.

Indeed, the act of posting a comment or picture can be a way of casting a wide net to friends and followers to ask them to bear witness to our experience. Getting comments and “likes” on social media might be a less direct strategy for seeking support; yet our hurt and disappointment when no one responds may feel much the same as if we had asked in person. Whether we speak face-to-face or through electronic communication, we are still giving voice to our need to be heard. By momentarily stepping out of his or her own frame of reference and into ours, the person who really listens acknowledges and affirms us. That validation is essential for sustaining the confirmation known as self-respect. Without feeling listened to, we are shut up in the solitude of our own hearts.

A thirty-six-year-old woman was so unnerved by an upsetting incident that she wondered if she needed psychotherapy. Estela, the executive vice-president of a public policy institute, had arranged a meeting with the lieutenant governor to present a proposal she'd developed involving the regulation of a large state industry. Of necessity she'd invited her boss to the meeting, although she would have been able to make a more effective presentation without him. The boss, in turn, had invited the institute's chief lobbyist, who would later have to convince legislators of the need for the proposed regulation. The meeting began, as Estela expected, with her boss rambling on in a loose philosophical discussion that circled but never quite got to the point. When he finished, he turned not to Estela but to the lobbyist to present the proposal. Estela was stunned. The lobbyist began to speak, and fifteen minutes later the meeting ended without Estela's ever having gotten to say a word—about *her* proposal. In her male-dominated

workplace, this was not the first time that Estela had had the experience of being disregarded, but, of course, it still rankled. Yet, in hindsight, that wasn't even what was most upsetting for her.

Estela couldn't wait to tell her husband what had happened. Unfortunately, he was traveling for work and wouldn't be back for three days. She was used to her husband's business trips; what she wasn't used to was how cut off she felt. She really needed to talk to him. As the evening wore on, Estela's disappointment grew and then changed character. Instead of simply feeling frustrated, she began to feel inadequate. Why was she so dependent on her husband? Why couldn't she handle her own emotions?

Estela decided that her problem was insecurity. If she were more secure, she wouldn't need anyone this much. She wouldn't be so vulnerable; she'd be self-sufficient. It wouldn't bother her so intensely that she was overlooked at work and lonely at home.

Estela's complaint—the unexpected urgency to be heard—and her conclusion, that if she had more self-confidence she wouldn't need to depend so much on other people's attention and responsiveness, is a common one. Needing someone to respond to us tempts us to believe that if we were stronger we wouldn't need other people so much. That way they wouldn't be able to disappoint us like this.

Being listened to does help us grow up feeling secure; but, contrary to what some people would like to believe, we never become whole and complete, finished products, like a statue or a monument. On the contrary, like any living thing, human beings require nourishment not only to grow up strong, but also to maintain their strength and vitality. Listening nourishes our sense of worth.

The more insecure we are, the more reassurance we need. But all of us, no matter how secure and well adjusted, need attention to sustain us. In case this isn't immediately evident, all you need to do is notice how we all have our own preferred ways of announcing our news. If my wife has news, for example, she's likely to call me at work or tell me as soon as she gets home. If she has something to say, she says it. Not me. If I have good news, I hoard it, save it up to announce with a fanfare—dying to be made a fuss over.

I once worked for months trying to land a book contract. My wife knew I was working on the book, but I didn't let her know that a contract was

imminent. Waiting and hoping, and trying not to let myself hope for too much, I had extravagant fantasies about getting good news—no, about sharing it. Telling my wife would be the payoff. What I didn't want to do was simply tell her; I wanted—I needed—my announcement to be a big deal. The day the contract finally arrived I was ecstatic. But the best part was looking forward to telling my wife. So I called her at work and told her I had a surprise for her: I was taking her out for a fancy dinner. She said fine and didn't ask any questions. (She's only known me for forty years.)

By the time I got home, my wife had changed into a silk dress and was ready to go out. She could tell I was excited, but she waited patiently to find out why. At the restaurant, I ordered a bottle of champagne, and when it came she asked, still patient, "Do you have something to tell me?" I pulled out my contract and presented it with all the *savoir faire* of a ten-year-old showing off his report card. She saw what it was and her face lit up with a huge grin. That look—her love and pride—was indescribably sweet. My own smile was wet with tears.

What elaborate lengths some of us go to for such moments! Those of us who feel the need to arrange special occasions for our announcements share a good deal with those who don't need to calculate so. The period of time during which we're waiting to tell our news is charged with anxious anticipation. We can feel the tension building. The tension has to do with an aroused impulse—to confess or confront or show off or propose—to make an impact on another person and be responded to. The excitement comes from hope for a positive response; the anxiety comes from fear of rejection or indifference.

One of the diabolically clever features of the iPhone is the display of thought bubbles—the "typing awareness indicator" that flashes rhythmically when someone (hooray!) is texting back to us after we have sent a message. We await the reply with heightened anticipation: the other person heard us and we are connecting! If he or she gets distracted and the bubbles disappear for a few seconds, or if the response appears as a cutesy emoji instead of a thoughtful sentence, we are apt to deflate a bit. And just as in person, we may feel even more disappointed when we get no response at all.

Whom you choose to tell what says something about your relationship to yourself—and to the other people in your life. Your presentation of self involves pride and shame—and whom you choose to share them with. With

whom do you feel safe to cry? To complain? To rage? To brag? To confess something truly shameful?

.....
A good listener is a witness,
not a judge of your experience.
.....

As soon as you're able to say what's on your mind—and be heard and acknowledged—you are unburdened. It's like having an ache suddenly relieved. If this completion comes quickly, as it often does in day-to-day conversations, you may hardly be aware of your need for understanding. But the disappointment you feel when you're not heard and the tension you feel waiting and hoping to be heard are signs of how important being listened to is. There are times when all that can be thought must be spoken and heard, communicated and shared, when ignorance and silence are pain, and to speak is to try to alleviate that pain.

"Guess What!"

Remember the last time something really wonderful happened to you. Do you remember waiting to tell someone? Whom did you choose, and how did it work out?

Being Heard Means Being Taken Seriously

The need to be heard, which is something we ordinarily take for granted, turns out to be one of the most powerful motives in human nature. Being listened to is the medium through which we discover ourselves as understandable and acceptable—or not. We care about the people who listen to us. We may even love them. But, for a time at least, we use them.

When we're activated by the need for appreciation, we relate to others as *selfobjects*, psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's telling expression for a responsive other, someone we relate to, not as an independent person with his or her own agenda, but as someone-there-for-us.

Perhaps the idea of using listeners as selfobjects reminds you of those bores who are always talking about themselves and don't seem to care about what you have to say. When they listen, their hearts aren't in it. They're only waiting to change the subject back to themselves.

This lack of appreciation can be especially painful when it occurs between us and our parents. It's maddening when they can't seem to let us be people in our own right, individuals with legitimate ideas and aspirations. Watching our parents listen to other people right in front of us can be especially aggravating. Why don't they show *us* a little of that attention? Here's the writer Harold Brodkey in *The Runaway Soul* dramatizing this irritating experience through the conversation of a young woman and her boyfriend (the boyfriend speaks first):

"Does your dad ever listen, or does he just do monologues?"

"He just does monologues. Doesn't he let you talk?"

"Only if I insist on it. Then we do alternate monologues."

"Well, that's it, then. He talks to you more than he does to me now."

Of course the woman's father talks to her boyfriend more than he does to her. The boyfriend is a fresh audience, new blood.

The people who hurt us most are invariably the ones with whom we think we have a special relationship, who make us feel that our attention and understanding are particularly important to them—until we see how easily they shift their interest to someone else or notice them checking their phones. Right in the middle of confiding in us, they'll catch someone else's eye and break off to talk to that person; they might be seeking virtual feedback from an online "friend" even though we actually made the effort to show up in person for them. We discover that what we thought was an understanding shared only with us is something they've told a dozen people. So much for our special status as confidants! What's so hurtful about these promiscuous "intimates" isn't that they use us, but that they rob us of the feeling that we're important to them, that we're special.

Although none of us likes to see (especially in ourselves) the kind of blatant narcissism that disregards the feelings of others, the truth is, much of the time we're all hopelessly absorbed with our own concerns. The subject of narcissism turns out to be crucial in exploring the art of listening, especially

today, when we add social media to the mix. It's a whole new level of narcissism out there with people jostling for the limelight, carefully curating their preferred identities to maximize attention, and grabbing a few extra crumbs of recognition by counting their virtual "likes." It's a fact that one aspect of our need for other people—in person and online too—is entirely selfish. Being listened to maintains our narcissistic equilibrium—or, to put it more simply, it helps us feel good about ourselves.

When Briana and her parents finished unloading the car, she felt a sinking sensation and was conscious for the first time of all the things she didn't have. Anxiously she watched as the other students and their families trooped into the dormitory, loaded down with beautiful pillows and down comforters, expensive AirPods, HDTVs, tennis rackets, road bikes, and lacrosse sticks. Briana had never even seen a lacrosse stick. By the time her parents drove off, leaving her standing alone in front of South Hall, her excitement about starting college had given way to dread.

Briana never did get over her sense of isolation that first year. Everyone else seemed to make friends so easily. Not her. She felt she didn't belong there. She called home a lot and tried to tell her parents how awful it was. But they said, "Don't worry, honey; everybody's a little lonesome at first," and "You should make more friends," and "Maybe you just have to study a little harder." If only it were that easy!

.....
Reassuring someone isn't the same as listening.
.....

By the first of December Briana was skipping classes, missing meals, and crying herself to sleep. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she made an appointment at the counseling center.

Briana was pleased when the therapist smiled and said to call her Noreen, then attended closely to what she had to say. She wasn't used to that kind of warmth and interest from adults. Noreen turned out to be the most sympathetic person Briana had ever met. She didn't tell Briana what to do or analyze her feelings; she just listened. For Briana, it was a new experience.

With Noreen's help, Briana was able to get through that first year and the three years that followed. Noreen helped her discover that her feelings

of insecurity stemmed from never feeling really listened to by her parents. Briana had always thought that they were pretty good parents, but she could see now that they never actually took the time to get to know her very well. Her father was remote and often too busy to talk with her, and her mother seldom took her seriously as a person.

Eventually Noreen convinced Briana that she would never be free of her anger—and vulnerability to depression—until she worked things out with her parents. When Briana agreed, Noreen suggested that she get in touch with me for a few family therapy sessions.

Briana and her parents arrived separately for our first meeting, and although they were all smiling, the three of them seemed as wary as cats circling a snake. I had suggested to Briana over the phone that we go slow in this first meeting, that she try not to unload the full weight of her anger on her parents but rather search for some common ground. But that wasn't the truth about what she was feeling, and the truth was what she was after. She started in on her father. When she was little, she'd loved him, she said, but as she got older she increasingly saw him as ridiculous and irrelevant. He worked hard, was a patriot, and almost nothing in his life caused him second thoughts. He had toiled long hours to be able to send her to this fine college and, to him, she must have seemed entirely ungrateful. After listening to his daughter's ungenerous assessment, Briana's father said, "So that's how you see me?" and then retreated into silence, his brand of armor. He disengaged so completely that it was no surprise when he didn't return for a subsequent session.

Then Briana turned to her mother. She called her "shallow," "phony," and—one of the cruelest things a child can say to a mother—"interested only in yourself." Briana's mother tried to listen but couldn't. "That's not true!" she protested. "Why do you have to exaggerate everything?" This only infuriated Briana more, and the two of them lashed out at each with escalating rage and intensity.

I tried to calm them down but wasn't very successful. Briana was hell-bent on communicating—not talking, that old-fashioned process of give-and-take, but *communicating*—that important development where one insistent family member imparts some critical information to the others, confronting the person with "the truth" whether she wants to hear it or not. Briana's mother left the session in tears.

The following week I met with Briana alone. She was sorry the meeting hadn't gone better but was glad to have gotten her feelings out. She thought her mother had shown herself to be the unaccepting person Briana knew her to be. They weren't on speaking terms for a while and that was just fine with Briana.

Six months later, much to my surprise, Briana called to say that she and her mother wanted to come for another meeting. This time the conversation began superficially. Briana complimented her mother on her shoes and asked about her younger sister. Her mother asked Briana how she was doing. Had she gotten over all that bitterness? Briana, feeling once again patronized and dismissed, tried to avoid reacting but couldn't. Furiously, she accused her mother of not really being interested in how she was feeling and caring only about polite formalities. My heart sank. But this time Briana's mother didn't react angrily or cut her daughter off. She didn't say much, but she didn't interrupt to defend herself either. What enabled her to listen to her daughter's angry accusations this time? I don't really know. Perhaps she didn't want to be estranged any longer; she really did try harder to listen.

One of a mother's heaviest burdens is being the target of her children's primitive swings between need and rage. The rage is directed at the hand that rocks the cradle no matter how loving its care. With daughters, it's often part of breaking away *and* staying connected at the same time. Briana's mother seemed to sense this, seemed to remember that her daughter was still her feisty little girl in some ways.

Briana may have expected retaliation from her mother. But when it wasn't forthcoming, she calmed down considerably. She had wanted, it seemed, only to be heard.

After that, Briana's relationship with her mother changed dramatically. Previously limited to monologues or muteness, they entered into dialogue. Briana phoned and wrote. She shared confidences with her mother. Not always, of course, and not always successfully, but Briana had become more open to her mother as a person, rather than perceiving her simply as a mother who was somehow supposed to selflessly make everything right. She, in turn, became less a child and more a young woman, ready for life on her own.

Briana's unmet need to be listened to had cut her off from other people and filled her with resentment. Unburdening herself was like breaking down

a wall that had kept her from feeling connected to other people. That she expressed her feelings in such an infantile emotional flood says only that they were a long time unspoken. Talking to Noreen, who didn't have a stake in defending herself, helped Briana find her voice and express her feelings in ways that others might be better able to hear.

That second meeting with Briana and her mother had produced one of those moments that happen once in a while in families, when someone says something and everything begins to shift. Only it wasn't what Briana said that caused the shift; she'd said it all before. It was that, this time, her mother put aside her own claims to being right and just listened.

When we learn to hear the unspoken feelings beneath someone's anger or impatience, we discover the power to release the bitterness that keeps people apart. With a little effort, we can hear the hurt behind expressions of hostility, the resentment behind avoidance, and the vulnerability that makes people afraid to speak or truly listen. When we understand the healing power of listening, we can even begin to listen to things that make us uncomfortable.

Digital Communication: The Struggle to Feel Heard When You Can't Be Seen

When you speak with someone you care about who is upset—especially if it's with you—your empathy for the distress can get all mixed up with your own reactions of defensiveness or anger. It's likely, for example, that Briana's rage in that first meeting was overwhelming for her parents; their emotional reactivity meant they couldn't really listen to her.

But what about when we communicate online—how do you really listen to a disembodied someone out there in cyberspace? These days, we are spending significant amounts of time in virtual conversations with people we can't see; arguably, the whole culture of listening has changed as the balance tips away from actual human contact. Now, we often have to make do without that extra information we get about someone by actually being there—tone of voice, facial expression, body language, eye contact, our knowledge of what is happening for the other person when she chews her lip

like that. Our strategies for listening in the digital world are compromised by the lack of social cues; perhaps not surprisingly, in the land of texting, many of our most important emotional exchanges are rife with a whole new level of misunderstanding.

Of course, there are many trade-offs with online communication; we are discovering more about both the opportunities and challenges as time goes on. In any event, 96% of Americans have cell phones, so we do well to think about how digital communication affects us and the people we are listening and speaking to.

On the positive side, maybe you like having the luxury to read a text or email carefully and edit your response so that you say what you really intend, instead of feeling on the spot and making a regrettable retort. If you are upset or preoccupied, you can wait to write back at a time when you can pay fuller attention and a situation doesn't get out of control as it might have in person. Or if you've been unwell and can't go out, it can be a wonderful diversion to keep up with a group of friends and let them know how you're doing. Studies suggest, overwhelmingly too, that parents are enthusiastic about the increased digital communication with their teens and young adults; they really like staying connected in this extra way.

On the other hand, without seeing the impact of your words register on someone's face, you might react with unnecessary cruelty or disregard for someone's feelings. Cyber bullying isn't just for teens; adults of all ages engage in it too. Comments scrawled in a harsh impulse on social media can be devastating. For example, I know a young mother, Renata, who'd posted on Facebook about her whiny toddler's ear infection, simply seeking sympathy. Minutes later, she instead found herself in the middle of a full-throttle debate about the evils of antibiotics and reading insinuations about the negligent quality of her mothering. Instead of feeling heard—as might have happened if people had just been able to listen to her exhausted voice—Renata reported that she'd been completely misunderstood; she was only looking to commiserate about how hard it was to console a sick baby.

And there is a growing body of evidence that we are actually becoming poorer listeners: all this reliance on virtual communication is directly implicated in this problem. Recent research suggests that some kids who are using social media to navigate relationships seem to be more self-involved and less self-reflective than their age-mates from past generations; it's possible they

might be so busy with presenting a particular image—seeing themselves from the outside—that they aren’t exerting as much effort getting to know themselves from the inside.

Some studies suggest that the digital experience may be making all of us less empathic, more impatient, and, maybe because our inboxes are flooded, more selective about what we even bother to pay close attention to. Because we can text (or “ghost”—simply disappearing from a text conversation) instead of having a difficult face-to-face dialogue, we might not be working as hard as we once did on developing those skills to navigate the hard patches, to find the courage to ask for forgiveness, and to offer it in return.

The desire to go online to announce an accomplishment, post a picture of an exciting vacation, or otherwise present an amazing version of our real life is perfectly understandable; it’s basically the same need we have to share our joy in person with our parents, partners, and friends—and it’s probably easier to do. Out of the same need for empathy, some might post a photo of a beloved dog who died or share the news of a bad diagnosis with all their friends on social media. Our yearning to connect with others about things that matter to us is hardwired. Yet the result will never be quite as satisfying as a real conversation. All the “likes” and hearts and sad emojis you can receive from a post probably won’t ever amount to one nourishing listen.

Being heard means being taken seriously. It satisfies our need for self-expression and our wish to feel connected to others. The receptive listener allows us to express what we think and feel. Being heard and acknowledged helps us clarify both the thoughts and the feelings, in the process firming our sense of ourselves. By affirming that we are understandable, the listener helps confirm our common humanity. Not being listened to makes us feel ignored and unappreciated, cut off and alone. The need to be known, to have our experience understood and accepted by someone who listens, is food and drink to the human heart.

Without a sufficient amount of sympathetic understanding in our lives, we’re haunted by an amorphous unease that leaves us anxious and lonely. Such feelings are hard to tolerate, and so we seek solace in passive escapism; we snap on the TV, shop online, watch porn, play Fortnite, scroll through Facebook, binge Netflix, treat ourselves to Ben and Jerry’s, or escape into popular fiction about people whose imaginary lives are more exciting than

our real ones. There is, of course, nothing wrong with relaxing. But why can't we stand in line in the grocery store without checking our phones? Why do we turn on the TV even when there's nothing to watch? And why do we feel restless without the car radio playing, even when it's just noise?

We usually associate escapism with release from stress. While it's true that many of us feel used up at the end of the day, it may not be overwork that wears us down, but a lack of understanding in our lives. Chief among the missing elements is the attention and appreciation of responsive people who care and listen to us with interest. When the quality of our relationships isn't sufficient to maintain our equilibrium and enthusiasm—or when we're not up to making them so—we seek escape from morbid self-consciousness. We seek stimulation, excitement, responsiveness, gratification, all seemingly available in the virtual world at the click of a button. How sad for us that we have come to depend so much on devices that only *almost* work to make us less lonely. But really, these are the kinds of feelings that can best be satisfied by a heart-to-heart talk with someone we care about. And without the consolation of someone to talk to, some of us will continue to drown out the silence, imagining that the next screen we look at might actually distract us from those low rumblings of despair and disconnection.

EXERCISES

1. Who is the best listener you know? What makes that person a good listener? (Not interrupting? Asking interested questions? Acknowledging what you've said?) What is being with that person like? What can you learn from that person that would make you a better listener?
2. What do you hesitate to talk to your partner about? Why? What happens to those withheld thoughts and feelings? What are the consequences of that withholding for you? For the relationship?
3. If you improved the way you listen, who would you want to notice? What conversations would you like to go differently?
4. If people think you aren't listening to them, what will they assume it means? What will this lead to?
5. If people think you are listening to them, what will they assume it means? What will this lead to?

6. The next time something is really bothering you, notice how you feel about wanting to talk with someone. Does something hold you back? What do you worry about? If you do share your feelings with someone, what happens?
7. What are some differences for you in how you communicate in person compared with texting? What kinds of conversations would you rather have in person? By text?
8. Have you ever spoken to people on a dating or social networking site and then met them in person? How were they different than when they presented themselves in writing?
9. Are there times when you have an emotional exchange on text that you realize would go better in person or on the phone?

Copyright © 2021 The Guilford Press