

peer counselling/active listening information and exercises

from <http://healingtrauma.pscap.org/peer.html>

in preparation for combat, soldiers and officers are typically pumped up for their fight, just as football players sike themselves up before a game. during the WTO protests in Seattle, activists later heard that FBI agents were telling police that four officers would die during the protests. This kind of falsity was sure to bring on the aggression of officers through scare tactics.

it is common for activists to take on similar tactics and work from a place of anger or fear. it is common for activists to use their emotions as a motivational springboard for their actions.

this technique is dangerous and unhealthy. grounded and centered activists tend to be able to make clearer decisions and not martyr or heavily endanger themselves.

as people opposed to military systems, we need to work past the boot camp mentality of actions and bring our full selves into the spaces where we voice our dissent.

in-the-field peer-counselling can help us stay grounded and centered, and can give us the space to remain whole and intact under tense and scary circumstances.

peer counselling is a method of counselling where 2 or more people exchange roles of listening and sharing to work through feelings and emotions that surround a particular incident. there is a skill to peer counselling, but it's non-professional--very grassroots. anyone can learn it, anyone can do it.

in the peer counselling groups i've been involved with, we've set aside a time for counselling. in groups of 2, each person would take turns and be both the listener and the sharer. this way any issues that arise with either person can have the space to be worked out. i've also used peer counseling while facilitating unlearning oppression workshops to bring people closer to other participants in the workshop and to give everyone in the workshop a space to connect their own experiences with the information in the workshop.

there are many ways to do peer counselling-- and the more you try it you'll probably make up some of your own. the most common way i've seen it done is this:

in a group of 2, one person begins as the listener while the other person shares. a specific amount of time is set up (i.e. 6 minutes). in that 6 minutes, 3 minutes

will be for one person to listen, and when the time is up, switch roles then the sharer can listen for 3 minutes while the person listening can share.

during a hectic action, it would seem more likely that there would be people who's role was to do crisis counselling in the field. one way i picture this happening is, a few people who want to be counsellors, located in a medic area, would be there to listen to activists who feel like they need to get through some difficult feelings (like the anger arising in them from being chased down by 20 cops with tear gas, or the incredible despair they might feel from being surrounded by state-funded weapons pointed at them, etc). this person would be set up with a counsellor who could ask some opening questions and guide them through talking out their emotions. the counsellors could possibly have certain amounts of time for each person, set aside and do some centering exercises, or give them essential oils or five flower essences for their anxiety. the goal would be to help someone be more grounded so they can approach their next step with clear thoughts. i think the counselors in this situation would have to take breaks and peer counsel with each other to make sure they are not getting past themselves either.

i can't emphasize enough how important it is to be taking care of our mental and emotional health while taking care of our physical wounds. trauma bonding, post traumatic stress, critical incident stress, anxiety attacks, depression, and dissociation will severely limit our ability to connect with hope and sustain our passions in life and activism.

despair is a common feeling among activists who have been beaten or gassed by cops; or are overwhelmed by the amount of pain, suffering and oppression in the world. it is necessary to use whatever skills we have to work through our despair--to find healing--and to live life fully.

a little about active listening from another source:

think back to those few friends, mentors, counselors, or family members who have had the biggest impact on you. how would you characterize the communication between you? was it helpful, meaningful, telepathic, or inspirational?

in one-to-one relationships with someone who knows us well, we are often in such complete synchronization that communication flows between us almost without words. or so we feel. if this is the case, is it because we excel at expressing ourselves, or because we are masters of listening? naturally, both are important, but, to turn a phrase, talk is cheap and listening is rare.

chances are that those who influence us most are powerful listeners. whether instinctively or through practice, they have developed the skill of empathy.

a university of maine researcher, dr. marisue pickering, identifies four characteristics of empathetic listeners:

1. desire to be other-directed, rather than to project one's own feelings and ideas onto the other.
2. desire to be non-defensive, rather than to protect the self. when the self is being protected, it is difficult to focus on another person.
3. desire to imagine the roles, perspectives, or experiences of the other, rather than assuming they are the same as one's own.
4. desire to listen as a receiver, not as a critic, and desire to understand the other person rather than to achieve either agreement from or change in that person.

further, she identifies ten discrete skills for empathetic listening, shown here.

1. attending, acknowledging --- providing verbal or non-verbal awareness of the other, ie, eye contact.
2. restating, paraphrasing --- responding to person's basic verbal message.
3. reflecting --- reflecting feelings, experiences, or content that has been heard or perceived through cues.
4. interpreting --- offering a tentative interpretation about the other's feelings, desires, or meanings.
5. summarizing, synthesizing --- bringing together in some way feelings and experiences; providing a focus.
6. probing --- questioning in a supportive way that requests more information or that attempts to clear up confusions.
7. giving feedback --- sharing perceptions of the other's ideas or feelings; disclosing relevant personal information.
8. supporting --- showing warmth and caring in one's own individual way.
9. checking perceptions --- finding out if interpretations and perceptions are valid and accurate.
10. being quiet --- giving the other time to think as well as to talk.

source: pickering, marisue, "communication" in explorations, a journal of research of the university of maine, vol. 3, no. 1, fall 1986, pp 16-19.

a poem about listening:

please, just listen
when i ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice,
you have not done what i asked.
when i ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me
why i shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings
when i ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do
something to solve my problem,
you have failed me, strange as that may seem.
listen! all i asked was that you listen,
not talk, or do... just hear.
advice is cheap: twenty-five cents will get you both
dear abby and billy graham in the same newspaper.
and i can do that myself. i'm not helpless.
maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.
when you do something for me that i can and need to do
for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.
but when you accept, as a simple fact, that i do feel
no matter how irrational, then i can quit trying to
convince you and get about the business of
understanding what's behind this irrational feeling.
and, when that's clear, the answers are obvious and i don't
need advice. irrational feelings make sense when we
understand what's behind them.
please listen and just hear me, and if you want to talk wait
a minute for your turn, and i'll listen to you

ray houghton, m.d.
teen times, nov/dec 1979

4 exercises to practice active listening:

activities for developing interactive communication skills

here are some exercises developed that will help you practice your active listening skills.

- 1) minimal encouragers (verbal and non-verbal)
 - 2) questions, reflections, summarization
 - 3) skills of self-expression: "1-2-3 pattern"
 - 4) practice session on effective confrontation
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1. minimal encouragers

the group should be divided into subgroups of three. there will be three roles in each subgroup: speaker, listener, and observer. everyone will take each role once in this practice, so divide into your subgroup and decide who is going to take which role first.

directions:

objective: the point of the practice session is to give each person the opportunity to learn how to use verbal and non-verbal minimal encouragers and become a better listener.

to the speaker: your task is to talk about something that is important to you: your job, your family, a decision, or a question. the practice will be more helpful if you talk about something you really care about, although role-playing is possible. you may find yourself in the midst of discussing something important when the allotted time runs out. if this happens, you could make an agreement with the person listening to carry on later, after work or during a break.

to the listener: your task is to practice the skills of the session: eye contact, body language, silences, and verbal minimal encouragers. don't panic! just concentrate on following the speaker's train of thought. try to limit your responses to the skills discussed in this session.

to the observer: your task is to observe the listener's verbal and non-verbal skills. observe and count only as many behaviors (eye contact, body posture, verbal minimal encouragers, topic jumps) as you can manage and still be relatively accurate.

procedure:

the first speaker will talk with the listener for three or four minutes. the listener will

then discuss the listening experience with the two other members of the subgroup. (to the listener: what was comfortable? difficult? did you stay with the speaker?) then the speaker will share his or her feelings about the listener's listening. (to the speaker: did you feel listened to? was it helpful? did the listener have any habits you found distracting?) the observer will then share observations. this sharing process should take about three or four minutes.

now everyone change places. have the listener become the speaker, the speaker the observer, and the observer the listener. go through the five minutes of talking and listening and five minutes of exchanging remarks twice more so that each person takes each role once. the entire practice session should take about 25 minutes.

when you are finished, form the large group. your facilitator will help you share your practice experiences. how are these skills relevant to your work? where else would they be useful? go around the group so that participants have a chance to share at least one thing they have learned about themselves in this practice session.

source: interactive skills program: helping through listening and influencing, hedlund and freedman, cornell university cooperative extension service, 1981.

2. questions, reflections, summarization

form subgroups of three and practice using question asking as a listening skills. each member of your subgroup should take turns being the speaker, the listener (who practices the skill of questioning), and the observer.

to the speaker: in the speaker role, we ask you to share something that is a real concern to you. obviously, we are not asking that you share anything that is very private or that might be embarrassing. sharing a real part of your life, however, will make this practice both interesting and useful. (and you might find it helpful to have someone carefully listen to your concern). or, you can tell of situations that occur in work--we all have a storehouse of work problems that give us difficulty.

the qualifier on being "real" in the practice sessions, however, is that we are here to give the listener a chance to practice interactive skills. if you, as the speaker, take all of the practice time in a monologue about yourself, the listener will not have a chance to practice listening skills. so, be sure to pause often to encourage the listener to respond, even though this may seem a bit unnatural. try to share information that allows the speaker to practice the skill of the session--the art of questioning. if you give the complete details of your concern, for example, it may be difficult for the listener to find anything to ask questions about. or, if your story is completely factual and does not include your personal feelings or opinions, the listener may have difficulty asking questions with a

speaker focus. as the speaker in the practice session, part of your job is to help your listener practice listening skills.

to the listener: in this session try to concentrate on asking questions, reflecting, and, at the end, summarizing even though this may seem difficult. you may use minimal encouragers occasionally, as long as your primary responses are questions. vary your responses between open and closed questions and vary the focus of your questions (i.e., on speaker, topic, or others). by using both open and closed questions you will also see how your question and its focus can determine the course of the conversation.

to the observer: keep track of the listener's responses. include the number of open and closed questions used by the listener and the focus of each question; note the use of feeling and factual reflection, and the effectiveness of the listener's summary.

procedure:

the speaker and listener will have a conversation of three or four minutes duration. the observer can also time the conversation, gently announcing "stop" when the time is up.

after the conversation, take a few minutes: first, the listener will share thoughts about how they used questions; second; the speaker will comment on his/her experience during the conversation and the listener's use of the skill; finally, the observer will share observations and comment on the conversation.

now trade roles and repeat the practice.

each listener practice should take eight to ten minutes: three or four minutes for the initial conversation and three or four minutes to review it--to share the listener's and the speaker's impressions and the observer's reactions (1/2 hour).

when exchanging observations about a conversation, please give the listener accurate feedback about how he or she used the skills. if the listener is having difficulty asking open questions, reflecting, or summarizing, say so and help him/her learn how to do so better. remember that the purpose of practice is for the listener to learn the listening skill. feedback and suggestions from both speaker and observer are essential to the learning process.

source: interactive skills program: helping through listening and influencing, hedlund and freedman, cornell university cooperative extension service, 1981.

3. self-expression: "1-2-3" pattern

procedure:

the group should be divided into sub groups of three, with three roles in each sub-group: speaker, listener, and observer.

the speaker should make a statement about something of personal concern or role play someone who is troubled and seeking information.

the listener uses active listening skills to understand what the speaker is saying and responds with factual or feeling content, and then checks to see that he/she was understood.

the observer concentrates on the person in the listener role, looking for as many self-expression skills as possible (using first person pronouns, factual vs. feeling expression, maintaining focus, use of tenses, etc.)

the first interchange should take three to four minutes, with a couple of minutes to share observation. if time permits the exercise can be repeated twice, after changing roles.

4. effective confrontation

procedure:

the group should break into sub-groups of four or five people. go around the group, with each person taking time speaking about some personal concern for a few minutes. the next person in line is the listener, who responds to the speaker with a confrontation. the group can then discuss the listener response-- was it a confrontation? was it effective? what was the focus? what are some alternative confrontations which could be made? after discussing the response, the listener becomes the next speaker. move around the circle as time permits, hopefully allowing each person to practice responding with a confrontation.

if there is time, discuss the use of confrontation as a skill of self-expression. what are the possible risks in using this skill? where might you use this skill in your work or daily life? how could you improve your capacity for self-confrontation (not self-depreciation). what are the benefits of confronting yourself?

source <http://crs.uvm.edu/gopher/nerl/personal/comm/e.html>