

## Are You REALLY Listening?

Do you think you're a good listener? Most of us do, right? We might list "good communication skills" as one of our strengths. Yet, so many of the people who come to see me who are struggling with one of the relationships in their lives will say that the main issue is "communication". It might be a couple saying "we just don't communicate anymore" or a parent of an adult child saying "I can't seem to communicate with her anymore". And many individuals I see say that they don't feel understood by their partners, or friends, or colleagues. So then, if we are all good listeners, why are so many people not feeling understood and so many relationships plagued by communication difficulties?



I put it to you that the core of "communication" difficulties is really an issue of listening, rather than of communicating. I think we're generally pretty good at putting our own point across, I think the issue is usually that no one is REALLY listening. I mean, yes, you're listening to the words being said, of course, but are you really listening to what they are saying.

In my experience working with couples, what I often see at the start of therapy looks something more like a high school debating team than a loving partnership! What I mean is this: while one person is talking, giving their point of view, I can see the other busily collecting counter points. You know how it goes in a high school debate? When Team A is putting across their argument, one member of Team B is busy coming up with counter points to improve their argument, topple Team A's arguments and win the debate. So what this means is that no one is really listening. It's all about your own argument.

If you think about communication, there has to be a sender and a receiver. So if there is something not being communicated effectively, it could be a problem with the sender – the message is not being delivered clearly – or a problem with the receiver – the message is not being received clearly. And more often than not, the issue is the latter.

Actually Morse Code is a great analogue for good communication in a relationship. When communicating by Morse Code, there are very clear rules. One side sends the message – dot dot dash. Then the other side first repeats the message that has been received – dot dot dash – before going on to send their reply – dash dash dot dot. And the first side again repeats that message before going onto say more. That way each side can be sure that their message got through clearly before listening to the response. Imagine the chaos if the first message wasn't repeated, and somehow hadn't been received clearly! Of course this is what is happening for a lot of people in their relationships – both people are talking, but no one is checking to see that they have actually received the right message.

## MORSE CODE

A	••—	N	•—••
B	••••—	O	—••••
C	••—••	P	••—•••
D	•••—	Q	••—••—
E	•	R	••—••
F	•••••	S	•••••
G	••—••	T	—••••
H	•••••	U	—••••
I	••	V	•••••
J	•—•••••	W	—•••••
K	••—•••	X	•••••
L	•••••	Y	••—•••
M	—••••	Z	••—•••
1	•—•••••	6	•••••
2	••—••••	7	•••••
3	•••••	8	•••••
4	•••••	9	•••••
5	•••••	0	—•••••

So what do we do about this? Here's a pretty simple, yet effective way to improve your communication and have better relationships. Just listen. Really listen. Drop your own agenda and stop thinking about what you want to say next, or what's wrong about what the speaker is saying, and really listen to them. Try bringing in an attitude of curiosity. I often invite my clients to listen to the other person and see if they can find something new, something they didn't know before – even if it's a slight change in perspective, or something they kind of knew but now get more clearly. If you can really listen with curiosity, really wanting to see if there is something here that you didn't already know, you will get yourself out of the debating team and into real communicating. Usually you feel like you've heard it all before, but if you listen with curiosity, I imagine that you'll find something that you didn't really know or understand. Then, let the other know what you heard. Repeat the message first, before you start talking about your point of view. Reflect back what you heard, and especially include the part that is new to you that you have discovered.

It's actual not that hard. Listening with interest and curiosity isn't difficult. It's deciding to do it that's hard. Letting go of your own agenda so that you can listen, that's what you have to work at. Someone once told me, a good 25 years ago, the following statement that I've held onto for all that time. That is: "You can either be right or be in a relationship". I don't know where it originates from, but I've quoted it many times since. If you're wedded to being right, and you debate your way through your communication, you'll end up right and winning the argument, but the chances are you'll lose connection in your relationship. And that probably won't feel good. So when you're communicating, decide if you want to be right or if you want to stay connected to your partner. And if you choose connection, then all you need to do is really listen, with curiosity.

I wish you some enjoyable and connecting communication.

Dr Karen Baikie  
 Consultant Clinical Psychologist  
 Certified Hakomi Therapist and Trainer  
 November 2016.