**Listening to Help**

**Interpersonal Communications**

**Mz. Hope**

We listen for information out of self-interest. Another reason to listen, though, is to help.

One survey found that “comforting ability” was among the most important communication skills a friend could have. Personal support is valuable when big problems arise, but research shows that **smaller, everyday distresses and upsets can actually take a bigger toll on mental health and physical well-being.**

**Invitation to insight: What would you do? Pg 299.**

**Advising:** When approached with another’s problem, the most common tendency is an **advising response:** to help by offering a solution. This is sometimes valuable, but it often isn’t as helpful as you might think. A partner who follows a suggestion of yours that doesn’t work out could pin the blame on you! Also, they may not be ready to hear the advice and instead just need to talk out their thoughts and feelings.

Before offering advice, be sure these three conditions are present:

1. Be confident that the advice is accurate. Be certain about the facts and resist the temptation to be the authority or expert on matters you know little about.
2. Ask yourself whether the person seeking the advice seems willing to accept it. In this way, you can avoid the frustration of making good suggestions, only to find that the person with the problem had another solution in mind all along (or they are unable or unwilling to do the work necessary!).
3. Be confident that the receiver won’t blame you if the advice doesn’t work out. You may be offering the suggestions, but the choice and responsibility of accepting them are up to the recipient of your advice.

**Judging: A judging response evaluates the sender’s thoughts or behaviours in some way.** “That’s a good idea!” or “An attitude like that won’t get you anywhere.” In either case, it implies the person doing the judging is in some way qualified to pass this judgment. Sometimes, these statements are purely critical: “Well, you asked for it!” or “You’re just feeling sorry for yourself.” These statements can bring the problem holder to their senses, or they can make the problem worse.

*Constructive criticism* can be negative comments that are not destructive: they are intended to help the problem holder improve in the future.

Judgements have the best chance of being received well when two conditions exist:

1. The person with the problem has requested an evaluation by you (avoids defensiveness).
2. The intent of your judgement is truly intended to help, not be used as a weapon.

**Analyzing:** In an analyzing statement, the listener offers an interpretation of a speaker’s message: “I think what’s really bothering you is…” “I don’t think you really meant that…” or “Maybe the problem started when…”

Interpretations are often effective ways to help people with problems to consider alternative meanings- ways they would never have thought of without your help. Two problems exist, however: first, your interpretation may not be correct, and if it is accurate but your partner is not ready to receive that information, they may become defensive. Be tentative, ask if your interpretation is accurate, and make sure your own motive is actually to help that other person, and is not to make you seem “right.”

**Questioning:** A questioning response can also be a way to help others think about their problems and understand them more clearly. It can help the problem holder to clarify vague ideas: “You said Greg has been acting “differently” lately- what has he been doing?” or “How did you feel when they turned you down? What did you do then?”

* Don’t ask questions to simply satisfy your own curiosity
* Don’t use questions to disguise your suggestions or criticism.

**Supporting:** There are times when a person wants to hear more than a reflection on how *they* feel; they want to know how *you* feel about them. There are several types of supporting responses:

1. *agreement* “You’re right- the landlord is being unfair.”
2. *offers to help “* I’m here if you need me.”
3. *praise* “ I don’t care what the boss said: I think you did a great job!”
4. *reassurance* “ The worst part is over. It will be easier from here on.”
5. *diversion “*Let’s watch a movie and get your mind off of this.”

Despite their apparent value, supportive responses are not always helpful. Telling a person who is obviously upset that everything is going to be fine (reassurance) or joking about something that they find serious (diversion), can leave a person thinking you don’t find their problem significant or valid.

**Ineffective support:**

1. Deny others the right to their feelings: “That’s a silly way to feel.”
2. Minimize the significance of the situation: “Hey, it’s only a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”
3. Focus on the “then and there” rather than the “here and now.” Looking at the past of the future can minimize the importance of now.
4. Cast judgement: ‘It’s your own fault.”
5. Defend yourself: “Don’t blame me; I’ve done my part.”
6. Rain on the other’s parade: “All Bs? When are you going to get an A?”

This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to be supportive! Two guidelines to use to be helpful:

1. Recognize that you can support another person’s struggles *even if you don’t approve of their decisions.* For example, “I know you have given this a lot of thought and that you are doing what you think is best.”
2. Monitor the other person’s reaction to your support. If it doesn’t seem to help, consider other types of responses which may help them to explore the issue.

Even if your **advice, judgements, and analysis** are correct and your **questions** are sincere, and even if your **support** comes with the best intentions, sometimes you cannot help. One study showed that mourners who had recently suffered the loss of a loved one reported that 80 percent of the statements made to them were unhelpful. Nearly half of the statements were advice: “You’ve got to get out more.” Despite their frequency, these responses were helpful only 3 percent of the time. The next most frequent response was, “She’s out of pain now.” Again, helpful only 3 percent of the time. Far more helpful were expressions that acknowledged the mourner’s feelings.

**Prompting:** Involves using silences and brief statements of encouragement to draw others out, and in so doing, to help them solves their own problems. It works especially well when you can’t help others make a decision; your presence can act like a catalyst to help others find their own answers. Only works if you are sincere!

**Paraphrasing:** Be sure to reflect **both** the thoughts and the feelings you hear being expressed.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Is the problem complex enough?
2. Do you have the necessary time and concern?
3. Are you genuinely interested?
4. Can you withhold judgement?
5. Is your paraphrasing in proportion to other responses?

**Read: Unconditional Positive Regard page 314.**