



BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER: PARAPHRASING AND REFRAMING

Active Listening

Active listening is an essential tool for good communication. When we are trying to communicate something to someone that is a bit complex, we naturally want that person to genuinely try to understand us. Often, what we are sharing is something that we are not totally sure of ourselves and because of this, we can be feeling vulnerable. It is frustrating when the person we are talking to quickly jumps in with unasked-for advice or a bunch of conclusions about what this person thinks we mean. When this occurs, the chance to work through what we were trying to communicate can be lost, along with the connection that we may have been able to make with this person.

What is more constructive is to have someone make the effort to understand what we are trying to say by reflecting back to us what they heard us say in that moment. By doing this, the listener is actively checking with us that they took in what we said and that they understood us. It is like a short summary of what we just communicated. This short summary is called a paraphrase.

Essentially, we the listeners, are acknowledging that we have a head full of our own thoughts and pre-conceptions that get in the way of being able to hear what someone is trying to communicate, irrespective of how well we may know the person. In that moment, we

are not yet tuned in to that person.

Therefore, we find it hard to hear and understand someone because:

1. We have a head full of pre-conceived ideas.
2. We are still on our own thought momentum and not, at first, tuned into the new conversation.
3. We have not learnt the art of skilful listening.

Being an active listener is very useful for a number of reasons:

1. I feel heard and respected – that you actually want to hear and understand what I am saying.
2. I feel an immediate connection with you that helps me feel more relaxed and open.
3. By hearing you paraphrase what I have said helps me to know if you are following me, and if not, I can explain further.
4. I may not really know at first how to say what I mean (which is often the case). Reflecting back to me what you heard me say helps me gain more clarity about what I am trying to communicate.

To genuinely understand what someone is saying requires a process – a collaboration where we create an open space together to explore what each other is genuinely thinking and feeling. Arriving at this mutual understanding naturally takes time, so we need to be patient.

Being perfect at this constructive form of communication is unnecessary and, of course, unrealistic. We don't have to worry about being totally accurate with our reflecting back. If we were, we would hardly need to bother. Because we are human, we must accept that we are bound to misunderstand what the other is saying on a regular basis. There are just too many variables within human interaction for this not to be the case. Any honest attempt to reflect back what someone has said will be appreciated.

Active listening lifts the communication process into our conscious-awareness and slows it down. In this way, it makes the process more forgiving of our human imperfections. We have more time to identify when our own biases, emotional insecurities and other unconscious reactions are being triggered. We become more conscious of the fact that we cannot be listening while blindly jumping to our own

conclusions. We can put aside what we “think” we know and instead take the time to patiently listen and understand. By being consciously committed to practising this better way of communicating, inevitably improves the quality of our interactions.

As part of this process, we can also ask questions of one another about what we have shared to help us understand the issue better. Due to our desire to truly listen, our questions will be much more relevant, and they will help us communicate with one another more effectively.

Here is an example of active listening:

Sharing: Last night I got really stressed out and angry. You were sitting in front of the TV watching the football with the volume turned up and you didn’t seem to care that the kids were arguing and fighting. I was trying work on my college assignment but couldn’t concentrate for all the distraction.

Reflecting Back: I am hearing that you got really stressed out and angry last night because of all the noise. Were you wanting me to be more aware of your needs and to pay more attention to the children?

One of the reasons active listening is so effective is that it taps straight into one of the deepest needs of our human nature—the need to be heard and acknowledged. For a child to Feel Loved and to develop properly, it is essential that we actively and positively interact with their thoughts, imaginings, needs, and feelings. For many reasons, few of us were mentored through childhood so effectively. If this does not happen, in many ways, children literally feel like they don’t exist, that they have little value, which can lead to vulnerability and poor interaction skills later in life.

Reframing

When it comes to handling angry or abusive communication, some additional skills are needed. Most often the angry person simply lacks good communications skills and is grateful for supportive guidance toward a better way.

Additional skills are needed to be adept at reframing, such as the ability to be aware of and process your own emotional reactions,

which helps you to not take personally what the angry person is saying to you—in other words, don't react. This can be a difficult skill to master and requires appropriate self-awareness and personal growth.

Unfortunately, the common attitude seems to be “why should I bother?” Why should I be nice when they treat me badly ? They made me angry. They deserve to be brought down a peg or two. The ego thinks that being “nice” in these circumstances also means having to compromise oneself. This is never the case. What I am actually advocating is that you make the highest choices for yourself. This ability to not react due to being able to take care of our own emotions is called self-empowerment and assertiveness and is one of the greatest treasures available to humanity and worth every effort to acquire. The benefit to you is peace, harmony, and inner-strength.

Succumbing to anger and reacting to another's anger is actually giving your power away, not preserving it. This message must be emphasized and repeated many times to penetrate the ego's confusion. When you surrender your power by reacting, you are being controlled by the situation. You are not in charge of your own mind. You are blindly reacting instead of consciously acting.

Our ego might derive some satisfaction from lashing out at someone, but that lower level reasoning is not switched on to how much more difficult it makes our lives in the long-term. Nor is it interested in taking adult responsibility for the quality of relationship that is created. It expects someone else to take that responsibility.

A good mental position to take that will help us adopt the right frame of mind is to assume that no one is deliberately out to hurt us. It is simply the case that most people just get confused. If you persist with this view of life you will be at least 95% right all the time! I encourage you to think seriously about that. Most of us would rather experience a better way. At times our wounded ego temporarily gets the better of us, even when we don't want it to. Who we really are would prefer a better way. Isn't that true for you? The other 5% will also be constructively dealt with by positively looking after yourself. We can learn to use the word “no” out of care for ourselves and *not* as a way of trying to punish the other person. You will not be adding

fuel to the fire.

It is important to repeat - most people don't mean to or want to be angry and hurtful. Most of us would rather a better way. If we approach each other in this way with persistence, we are likely to make positive changes. If, despite our best efforts, the anger and abuse persists, then strong boundaries may need to be put in place to protect ourselves.

By positively acting for your highest good, without putting the other person down, you will gain self-respect and often respect from others, even from those who don't like the boundaries that you put in place. There is always a choice. You can either focus on the other's heart or the other's emotional baggage. Whatever you choose to focus on, you *will* reinforce. That is the power that you have in this world, a power that you experience every day. You have the power to make your life easy or hard. You can deny this fact all you like, but denial does not make this personal responsibility for the life that you create go away. You are the creator of your reality. Instead of lashing out, you can choose to help another out of their temporary confusion if their heart is open enough, and help yourself in the process. Everybody wins!

A skill that goes well with active listening, that helps to positively deal with angry and or derogatory communication is **reframing**. When we use reframing, we filter out the abuse and reflect back to the angry person a reconstructed version of what was said. The paraphrase contains the important information but worded in a constructive way. In other words, we pretend the communication was delivered in an appropriate way and reflect it back accordingly.

Example 1.

Unskillful communication: You just broke my good china jug, you idiot! That's the one Mum gave us as our wedding present. You're bloody useless!

Reframing: You're upset because that was a wedding present from your Mum.

Example 2.

Abusive communication: You jerk! What did you do that for! I had

arranged all that stuff very carefully and now you've messed it all up.

Reframing: I see that you're very angry that I disturbed your things. Can we spend a moment to work out how we can avoid this happening again? I am keen for us to find a way to work together harmoniously.

Note how the name calling has been filtered out and only the essence of the message is paraphrased. The person delivering the unskillful communication may not let go of their negativity straight away, but if we persist with this reframing response, it will have a positive effect. Note in Example 1, my partner's feelings have been acknowledged. My partner's deep need to be heard and acknowledged will be soothed by my response and her attitude is likely to soften accordingly. We will then be in a better position to deal with the matter constructively. My partner may even feel a bit guilty for her abuse and apologize. I have connected to her heart, and in the process helped her upset inner-child feel acknowledged. This will help her to shift out of her fight-or-flight reaction and enable her heart to respond. Even if she doesn't respond constructively straight away, it will get her thinking along those lines.

If I became angry in return and fire back with abusive words of my own, that opportunity for a quick resolution and healing of the situation would be lost. All I will be doing is strengthening and deepening the blind confusion. It is my responsibility to my own wellbeing to learn the skills that create harmony wherever possible.

When We Can't Get a Word In

Sometimes the person communicating gets a little carried away and talks at us for a long time while hardly drawing a breath. This style of sharing can make it very difficult to find a space to reflect back. We lose track of what is being said, and can feel a bit run over by the communication. This can be frustrating and draining. The skill here is the ability to break into the conversation and communicate your need to understand what the other is saying and also to reflect your need to feel included in the conversation in a way that is affirming and disarming for the other person. The conversation can then be transformed into a more satisfactory experience for you and the person giving the monologue, who is usually unaware of how he/she is communicating.

Reflecting back:

a) Excuse me darling, you're giving me too much information to hold on to. Let me check with you to see if I am hearing you right so far.

or

b) I need to break into the conversation here so I don't lose track of what you are saying. Can I check with you what I have heard you say so far? I can get a bit lost when there is too much information. I really want to hear what you are saying.

Reflecting back in this way will help raise the other's awareness of how they are communicating. Knowing that you really want to hear what they have to say will help them relax and connect with you better.

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Active listening and paraphrasing can take a lot of practice, and as is often the case when learning a new skill, it can feel odd and perhaps a little false and clumsy at first. The tendency to want to jump in and "fix" the issue by giving advice instead of just listening and reflecting back can be a very ingrained habit. It is also very difficult not to react and be defensive. This skill of "holding the space" for our partner's feelings and sharing is very important for effective communication and intimacy. It is well worth the persistence and has the potential to save a relationship.

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Be an Active Listener

Paraphrasing and Reframing Summary

- Giving advice is often not helpful.
- We are all capable of finding our own solutions.
- It is more effective to help another talk an issue through so they can get in touch with their own knowing.

- Active listening is an essential tool of good communication.
- By reflecting back (paraphrasing) to me what I have just shared with you, you help me to feel heard and to better understand my own thoughts.
- Paraphrasing also helps you to hear me and to not react negatively to my sharing.
- Active listening slows the communication down and makes it more conscious and therefore effective.
- We can ask questions about what is being shared to help our understanding.
- Active listening helps people connect more deeply.
- The need to be heard and acknowledged is very fundamental to human beings.
- Misunderstanding between people is normal. Active listening helps to overcome this.
- Another active listening tool is reframing. Reframing is a useful tool that handles unskillful communication positively.
- We often simply lack good communication skills and are open to be shown a better way.
- When reframing, we filter out the abuse and reflect back a constructive version of what was said as though we didn't hear the abuse at all.
- We can either focus on a person's heart (good nature) or their emotional baggage. Whatever we focus on, we will reinforce.

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Changing the Old Program

A useful communication exercise

Practising Active Listening Skills

1. If you can, let your partner know that you are learning about active listening and share this information with him/her.
2. If your partner is not open to this yet, then go ahead and do your

best to be a good communicator and let that inspire your partner in time.

3. It may help to read over this information together, even though you may have already read it alone. Take time to discuss it.

4. Do some practice together by having your partner share something and then you reflecting back using paraphrasing, and vice-versa.

5. Remember, there is no perfection. Try to have fun with it.

6. Make a pact to help each other by GENTLY reminding each other to slow down and reflect back when communicating.

7. You can prepare each other for the communication by letting each other know that you have something you need to talk over and you would like them to listen carefully by reflecting back.

8. Make sure you do your best to communicate in such a way that gives your partner a chance to reflect back.

9. Don't give up. Keep practising. It can make all the difference.

10. Keep referring to this information to help you stay focused and to continue to deepen your understanding.