

Active listening

Meaningful conversations are central to supporting people to identify and realise the outcomes they want to achieve. To have meaningful conversations practitioners need to be skilled in active listening (Cook and Miller, 2012) – that is giving full concentration to what the person is saying and feeding back your understanding of this using verbal and non-verbal communication (Skills you Need, 2016). Active listening involves taking a step back, not jumping to conclusions or making assumptions. It requires patience and resisting the temptation to take control of what is going on and/or come up with solutions for the person - it can be a difficult skill to master and takes practice to perfect.

Kimsey-House et al (2012) describe three levels of listening when having a conversation with another person.

Level one: Internal listening

Level two: Focused listening

Level three: Global listening

Example

Person: "Most of the time I can eat without any help if the food is cut into bite size pieces for me. Sometimes I have difficulty because of the tremors I get. Mary has to help me then, keeping my fork steady or supporting my cup for me."

Practitioner response:

Internal listening: That would really frustrate me, does it frustrate you? Have you tried using a double handled mug?

Focused listening: So you have difficulty with eating and drinking too sometimes. How often would you say you need help with this? I'm sensing that accepting help is not easy for you – is that right? How does needing help make you feel? What is it about being helped that makes you feel like this?

Global listening: As focused listening but adding question(s) to help move the person forward. What is it about the way Mary does things that makes it easier for you to accept help? How would it feel if someone else was helping you if they did things the way that Mary does?

In this tool we explore each of these levels, which become progressively more 'active'. Examples are provided for each level to illustrate the differences in how much information is being gathered and understanding of what is going on increases.

Level one: Internal listening

At this level the practitioner's awareness is on themselves not the person. The attention of the conversation may appear to be on the person; but the practitioner is actually projecting their own opinions, feelings and thoughts on what is being said and coming to conclusions as to how they would feel or act as they try to make sense of what is being said. The result being they put their own interpretation on what the conversation means and don't reflect back to the person. Therefore, there is no affirmation or shared

understanding of what has been discussed. It is likely the practitioner wants to solve the problem for the person, or offer advice based on the conclusions they have drawn internally.

Whilst it is important to be able to listen at this level, to better understand yourself, and your reactions to what is going on, it is not appropriate to operate at this 'self-absorbed' level for any length of time. A conversation where the practitioner is operating at this level will consist mainly of closed questions, requiring yes or no responses, with no feeding back of understanding to the person. It may also be interspersed with unsolicited opinion or advice.

Level two: Focused listening

At level 2 the practitioner's awareness is totally on the person. They are paying attention to the person's verbal and non-verbal communication – everything that the person brings to the conversation. Listening at this level requires noticing not only what the person is saying, but also what they are not saying, interpreting body language, such as a clenched jaw or nervous hand movements. Sensing differing emotion behind differing aspects of the conversation. Focused listening should enable understanding of what is important to the person, for instance, what makes them come alive and what makes them withdraw or become defensive.

The verbal and non-verbal information coming from the person is being processed by the practitioner and is reflected back in their responses at regular intervals to ensure a shared understanding and recognition of what is of significance. They perceive the impact of their response on the person and incorporate this into their analysis of the meaning of what is being said.

The conversation will include more open questions and will utilise powerful questions.

Level three: Global listening (or environmental listening)

When listening globally, or environmentally, the practitioner's awareness is still focused on the other person as with level 2. In addition, they are more aware of other environmental factors. A practitioner able to operate at this advanced level will be able to observe with their senses, what they see, hear, smell and feel. The practitioner will also bring into play their intuition. Through their intuition they will be able to receive information that is not directly observable, but be able to use that information just as they would use the words coming out of the person's mouth.

The practitioner will be able to take process this information in order to assess what the person might be thinking and feeling – intuitively reading the emotions the person is experiencing and adjust their verbal and non-verbal response accordingly to complement the signals coming from the person. Listening at this level requires the ability to read your impact and adjust your behaviour accordingly. An experienced global practitioner will be able to read a room and monitor how it changes in response to what is said or done. This is a great skill to have where conversations involve multiple persons, for example, multi-disciplinary case conferences or group family conferences.

The conversation will consist of open, powerful, questions with closed questions used appropriate and with skill. Along with this the practitioner will stimulate reflection and

clarification to effectively enable the person to move forward and draw their own conclusions. This level includes the action, the inaction and the interaction.

When a practitioner is able to operate in a conversation at levels 2 and 3 they will be able to analyse what is going on by combining the sense of what is happening right now with what they already know about the person. They should be able to:

- succinctly describe what is going on;
- test / clarify this to ensure a shared understanding “This is what I am hearing..... is this right?”; then
- share their observations with the person without judgement by reframing them in a positive strengths based way in response to the mood/tone of the conversation