



Spiritual Conversation Listening Skills

This is an important handout which you will probably want to refer back to as the course continues. It begins with sections on **Rapport**, **Core Conditions of the Listener** from the therapeutic work of Carl Rogers, and **Non-Verbal Communication**. Then it defines **8 key active listening skills**. It finishes with sections on **Listening in Spiritual Conversation** (what are we listening to, and why, and what for?) and **Blocks to Listening**.

Rapport

Rapport means “a close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well” (Oxford Dictionary). Sometimes we simply ‘click’ with someone and have ‘instant rapport’. Building ‘good rapport’ or ‘healthy rapport’ is also a skill we can learn and practice. Establishing the **core conditions**, being aware of our **non-verbal communication**, and practising our **active listening skills** can all help to build and maintain rapport.

Core Conditions of the Listener

Carl Rogers (who pioneered ‘person-centered therapy’ in the 1940’s) identified three **core conditions** which he considered necessary for building a productive counselling relationship. These attitudes and qualities of the listener described by Rogers similarly need to be present in the person involved in spiritual conversation.

Congruence/Genuineness

This is the ability of the listener to be sincere and genuine with the speaker. Being natural and present to the other person avoids the need for pretence or a working facade. The listener is able to be him/herself which encourages the speaker to do likewise. This authenticity requires the listener to have a reasonable level of self-awareness and self-knowledge. N.B. This honesty within the relationship does not imply an uninhibited frankness with the speaker.

Empathy

An ability to have an awareness and understanding of the world as experienced by the speaker. It is to get inside their frame of reference, to get in touch with the individual's experience of self, life, reality, relationship with God. It is seeing from their perspective without becoming subject to it or being overwhelmed by it. It is to 'be able to walk a mile in their moccasins'. It

is **not** communicating that you know 'just what they mean' (you don't!) because exactly the same thing happened to me (it didn't!)

Unconditional positive regard / Respect

The ability to welcome, accept and value the person as an individual. It is providing a safe space where judgements are placed to one side. Be aware that this person is loved, gifted and accepted by God as they are – not as they or you might like them to be. It does not mean that you have to approve of or condone everything (you are dealing with a sinner, like you), but makes a distinction between the person and their actions. It requires an unshockability and being able to remain unfazed whatever is said.

Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication (NVC) can be defined as all forms of human communication not controlled by the spoken word. The face and the body are a means of communicating and research recognises that good listening includes an attentiveness to non-verbal behaviour.

NVC includes the following:

- Physical features such as complexion, fitness, body movement
- General appearance such as choice of clothes, style, cosmetics, body decoration (jewellery, piercings, tattoos etc)
- Physical behaviours such as posture, gestures, touch, eye contact
- Facial expressions such as smiles, raised eyebrows, frowns,
- Para-lingual cues such as tone of voice, pitch, pace, silences, hesitations, sighs
- Physiological responses such as blushing, pupil dilation, tears, quickened breathing

Egan (1994) summarises the micro-skills that can be used as non-verbal encouragements to active listening as follows:

- S** **Sit** attentively at a slight angle to the speaker.
- O** **Open** posture. Don't close yourself off by rigidly crossing arms/legs.
- L** Occasionally **lean** slightly forwards to show emphasis or interest.
- E** **Eye** contact with the speaker, but avoid staring.
- R** **Relax**, don't fidget. Try to adopt a natural posture.

The perception and interpretation of NVC are subjective and influenced by the listener's experience, biases and mental state. Therefore it is important to notice non-verbal cues but to remain open to their possible meaning until further data from the speaker confirms or clarifies it.

Active Listening Skills

This section defines 8 key active listening skills. Different listening skills approaches and courses may label or define them in other ways but these are the definitions we use on this course. Each of us tends to have listening skills that we are comfortable with and can have a tendency to overuse - especially questions! As you read this list, notice what feels familiar and comfortable to you, and what feels less comfortable. And don't be surprised if your team observers notice that you seem to prefer some listening skills rather than others, and encourage you to experiment with the ones you seem to use less often.

Summarising

This skill gathers together different strands that the person may have been sharing and reflects them back in an ordered and understandable way. Accurate summarising should show understanding of what has been said, reflect the story in order of events, avoid being judgemental, be used at an appropriate time and be open to correction by the speaker.

e.g. 'I have just had a terrible summer. The dog died and then we had that awful weather. We have a stream at the bottom of the garden and the water just rose and rose and eventually reached the house. It was just awful. And then on top of that it meant I had to cancel the holiday we'd all been planning for months.'

'You had a really stressful time, with losing your pet, the house being flooded and then the disappointment of not getting away with the family.'

Paraphrasing

This can sometimes be similar to a summary but it's more of a rewording of the content of what the other person is saying. We find another way to say what the speaker has said rather than attempting to repeat their words exactly.

E.g. I was late for the wedding because there was a car in front of me going too slowly and I couldn't get past it.

The traffic meant that you were delayed in getting to the wedding.

Reflecting back feelings

This communicates to the person that their words and feelings have been heard. The skill of reflecting can be likened to holding a mirror in front of the person speaking so that he/she can see more clearly. It is similar to paraphrasing except focuses on the emotional content of what is being said or implied as well as the information. It encourages a person to stay with what seems to concern them.

You say you feel ...

You sound as if ...

You seem surprised that...

I get the impression that you're feeling ... about

You say you're afraid that ...

Verbal Mirroring or ‘Parroting’

Similar to reflecting but feeding back a word or phrase the person has used, possibly with a question mark in your voice.

E.g. 'I was really disturbed by that story in the gospel.' *Disturbed?*

Silence

Not interrupting or feeling uncomfortable, but allowing time for natural pauses, reflection, finding the right word, deciding to say more.

Questions to explore

These are useful when encouraging a person to explore more deeply and can help to define further what is being shared. Questions have to be used and timed very carefully as too many questions can create a barrier and prevent a conversation from dropping deeper. Be aware too of why you want to ask a question e.g. curiosity, getting the facts straight, helping the person focus. Questions can be closed i.e. require only a yes or no reply or open i.e. require the person to respond with a longer reply and to develop what they are saying.

Open questions tend to be *How? What? Where? Why? When?*

E.g. closed question – did you like the film more than the other?

Open question – what did you like about the film compared to the other?

Focusing

This skill helps the person to explore one specific subject rather than trying to work with many issues at once. It helps the person to define issues more clearly and look at specifics

e.g. *You've been telling me ... How has it affected you? You mentioned*

What particularly stays with you now just as you were talking?

Clarifying

This skill is used to check out with the person that what you have heard is correct or to clear any uncertainties regarding the information being shared.

e.g. 'I took the car and did the shopping. Then it was when I was on the bus coming back that he tried to pinch my bags from me.'

'So you went in the car but you came back by bus? Had something happened to the car so you couldn't use it to get home?'

Listening in Spiritual Conversation

What are we listening to in spiritual conversation?

The short answer is *whatever the speaker brings*. But also to what God seems to be doing or saying.

- Words (*the story, what and how it is told, the affective response*)
- Body language (*posture, tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions etc.*)
- Silences (*time reflecting, difficulty in expressing things, getting in touch, tasting God's presence*)
- God (*what is God doing? What is the other's sense of God here? What is God like for them?*)
- Our inner response to what is shared

Why are we listening?

- To help the speaker continue speaking and exploring
- To know how to respond
- To allow the story or picture to unfold (*what is known and shared, what is known and not shared, what is not known*) in order to deepen the experience **for them**
- To explore where they need to go in prayer
- 'To help a person relate personally to God, to let God relate personally to them, and to enable them to live the consequences of that relationship.' (p136 *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, Barry and Connolly)

What are we listening for?

- What is said (*what they are aware of and choose to share. It may need drawing out*)
- What is not said (*for whatever reason*)
- The feelings
- The desires (*desire, as the deepest, truest, most personal experience of grace, reveal who we are in Jesus and are God-given. God is very personally present and at work in them*)
- The movements (*the flux of thoughts, affective acts and affective feelings that are in motion in the soul*)

Blocks to Listening

- **External factors** - such as noise, interruption, physical space
- **Personal factors** – for example tiredness, grief, pain, impaired hearing
- **Rehearsing a response** – the listener becomes preoccupied with creating a suitable reply and often fails to tune into what is actually being communicated.
- **Problem solving** – the listener attempts to find solutions to what is being shared. Giving advice can lead to the listener focussing on facts and failing to recognise any feelings being shared. Over time advice-giving can cause the person speaking to become more dependent on the listener and to forfeit personal responsibility.
- **Competing** – the listener is involved in comparing the other person to him/herself and is concerned with showing how much better the listener measures up than the speaker.
- **Culture** – the listener makes assumptions about the background, experience and expectations of the speaker based on the listener's culture and not the speaker's.
- **Dreaming** – the listener connects in their mind with something said by the speaker. This leads to another association and so on with the listener being in their own dream world. The listener becomes totally tuned out of the conversation.
- **Distraction** – this is used when the listener becomes uncomfortable or bored with the conversation. The listener suddenly switches the focus of the conversation to a radically different subject leaving the speaker uncertain and confused.
- **Filtering** – the listener chooses to tune in to certain parts of the conversation and to tune out of others. This may be because what is being said is threatening, seemingly irrelevant or something the listener does not want to acknowledge.
- **Identifying** – the listener identifies with what the person is saying and begins to talk about their own similar experiences so that the focus moves to the listener being the centre of the conversation.
- **Grievances** – previous negative feelings and thoughts within the relationship which have built up over time are voiced all at once, preventing any real conversation taking place.
- **Ignoring** – the person listening does not give any response to what is being said, giving the person speaking no suggestion that what is being shared is of any importance.
- **Labelling** – the listener quickly judges a person by what they say. Once the person has been placed in a certain 'box' then there is no further need to listen well to understand the other, as the listener already has a set of judgements to go by.
- **Placating** – The listener consistently agrees with the speaker to avoid any negative feelings or conflict and to ensure being liked by the other.

What are the blocks that you are aware of that affect your listening?