

How to Listen to Someone in Need

James 1:19 “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...”

You may not be a trained (or sufficiently experienced) counsellor:

a) *But you can still help a person greatly*

- A burden shared is a burdened halved
- All some people need is someone to listen to them
- A person will clarify their understanding of their problem as they talk to you
- Great help and healing come from a person knowing someone loves them and takes them seriously enough to listen to them
- You’ll be surprised how God enables you to help them
- You can pray with them and this will be very helpful
- You can say you will continue to pray and be available to listen.

b) *However, don’t allow yourself to get too far out of your depth*

- Refer the person to an experienced counsellor if necessary.

How do you help a person? How do you become a good listener?

1. Create a safe environment for honest sharing

a) *Warmth*

b) *Caring*

c) *Relaxation* (see section 2)

d) *Encouragement*

- Would you like to talk about it?
- Would it help to tell me about it?
- How are you coping with it?
- What do you feel about it?
- How do you react to it?

e) *Acceptance:*

- without criticism (avoid saying things like: “You mustn’t think/feel/speak like that”; “You must forgive”;
- without implied criticism (avoid saying things like: “We have the victory in Christ”; “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”; “Rejoice in all circumstances”; “There are many people worse off – the persecuted church, the Third World Christians ...”; “Ask the Lord to show you anything in your life which may have given the devil an opportunity to attack you.”)
- without expression of shock or distaste
- appropriate facial expressions: smile or a look of compassionate distress. Even a raised eyebrow or frown can do damage.

2. Deal with any “threat you feel”

- a) Preoccupation with your own thoughts, duties, deadlines, problems and lack of time
- Tense body language

- Fidgeting
 - Disinterested, preoccupied comments or “Mms”!
- b) Not knowing what to say, which can lead to
- saying the wrong thing, e.g. “I understand how you feel” (You probably don’t if it is a very deep pain such as bereavement)
 - fobbing them off with a quick comment or even a verse of Scripture/prophecy/picture e.g. “Never mind, trust in God”; “Give thanks in all circumstances”
 - being impatient “What’s the matter *now*?” “You’re not the only one with problems”
 - avoiding the person
- c) Threatened by the other person’s problem, e.g.
- Sickness and its associated problems
 - Terminal illness
 - Disablement
 - Lack of healing
 - Set backs or lapses
 - Bereavement

3. Put yourself in the other person’s place (empathise)

Empathy has been defined as “your pain in my heart”

- a) How would *I* cope with their problem?
- b) What would I need from others if I had their problem?
- c) “I wanted someone to climb down into the pit and sit with me before helping me to get out, rather than someone to shout instructions from the top.”

4. Listen, before speaking

- a) Focus your attention on the person
- b) Keep regular eye contact
- c) Don’t gaze about or (even surreptitiously) look at your watch.
- d) Give them time to explain fully
- e) Don’t interrupt but do show empathy by facial expression or very brief verbal responses
- f) Don’t finish their statements for them or show off your prior discernment of their problem
- g) Don’t jump to conclusions about their problem(s)
- h) Listen with full attention rather than thinking about what you want to say.
- i) Listen to the feelings behind the words.
- j) If, having listened, you don’t know what to say, breathe an arrow prayer offering the other person’s *cri de coeur* to God and expect help
- k) If you still don’t know what to say, just be there and perhaps say you don’t

5. Don’t patronise the other person

e.g. The “Does he take sugar?” approach to disablement; the “slap and tickle” approach to the elderly

- a) Treat them as a mature adult
- b) Physical impairment/weakness does not mean they are not whole people
- c) Physical impairment/weakness does not mean they are mentally impaired cf. Stephen Hawking.

6. Deal gently with an over-talkative person or chronic complainer

- a) Align your attitude with that of Jesus
- b) Keep to an adequate but limited time

- c) Arrange another appointment (this gives the other person something to look forward to and enables you to leave more easily)
- d) Physically leave if need be: smiling and waving throughout!

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