

PULSE

Truly listening involves more than just hearing another's words

Most of us, at some point or another, have been told we weren't listening. And most of us have felt exasperated to be told that, because at the time we felt we were. Yet clearly, our loved one across from us was not feeling understood.

Listening is different than hearing. Listening requires more of us than our ears and head. When someone is sharing about their pain, their hopelessness or their despair, we have to learn to listen.

It can be difficult to listen to the suffering of others. I've met with countless clients who have shared they feel they have no one in their life they can open up with about their despair because they fear they will not be listened to. They have commonly been told to look on the bright side, that their life is not that bad, that they have plenty

to be grateful for. They have been given pats on the back and told, "It'll be OK." They've been stared at and had the subject changed.

Listening can be difficult. It requires us to try to feel what others are feeling. Few are comfortable sitting with despair.

And yet we must. Most people struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts will not be blunt about this. It will be hinted at. It will be eluded to. They are testing the waters. Are you listening? Do you care enough to ask more?

The tendency when hearing others share their pain is to try to make them feel better. Who could blame you? The tendency is to



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problem-solve and cheer up. However, it is critical to understand that these good intentions can sometimes make people who are suffering feel more isolated. They've tried to cheer up. They've tried to be grateful. It didn't work.

Your job is not to be their therapist, but rather to just try to understand.

Ask more questions. Ask why they feel that way. Ask what they've tried to make them feel better. Ask what has helped. Ask how long they've suffered. Empathize. Share that you don't know how to make them feel better, but you're truly sorry they're not doing well. Be vulnerable yourself. The fear is that by opening the topic up you're making it worse.

Suffering people long to be listened to. It is in and of itself good medicine.

Part of good listening is also knowing your limits. Most people aren't therapists and don't need to be. It is important to listen, understand and then point people in the directions of help. It is not a rejection to suggest someone seek therapy. Sometimes the most compassionate thing you can do is to admit when you're out of your depth. Encourage people to seek out help and to keep seeking it out until they find what they need.

May you and those you love feel listened to and understood.

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