

# Active Listening: Tips for Providing a Listening Ear

As a Peer Connections Volunteer, you will use *listening as the key helping attribute* within your personal interactions. Providing a listening ear is the most important skill Peer Connections Volunteers bring to their interactions.

## Topics (Ctrl + Click to go to the section)

Careful Listening

Active Listening

The Commonality of Experiences

Building Trust through Your Responses

Techniques & Potential Phrases/Responses

Potential Roadblocks to Communication

Takeaways

## Careful Listening

Careful listening is a prerequisite for all support responses and techniques. It involves observing and responding to what is being communicated. Responding verbally to communicate listening is the most important part of support and is even more important because you lack information when doing support by telephone or email. Good listening is demonstrated by:

- Showing interest through tone of voice.
- Asking appropriate questions about what is being discussed.
- Saying things like “Yes” or “I hear what you’re saying” to convey interest.
- Offering general leads that encourage a person to continue, such as “What happened next?” or “What else?”
- Staying with the present point without jumping ahead to the next topic.
- Listening for both the facts and feelings.

It is important to hear or read cues that will help provide information about the person on the other end of the phone. These include:

- Tone of voice may express what a person is feeling.
  - A person who is angry may sound loud and emphatic; a person who is depressed may sound flat, with little expression.

- Spacing of words, sighs, and silence all give indications of emotional states.
- Silence may seem longer on the phone because visual cues are absent.
- Hesitancy or rapid pacing of statements when discussing certain subjects may indicate fear or anxiety.

It is important not to fill in the silence too quickly when dealing with hesitancy via phone. Rushing to fill in the gaps may convey that it is not okay to express sadness or thoughtfulness. At the same time, letting too much time pass may imply that you are not listening. If a person has expressed deep feelings followed by silence or sighs, it would be appropriate to wait a moment and say something like, “It is okay to be sad” or, “You’re really grieving the loss of your job.”

You run the risk of obstructing the listening process if you:

- Change the subject or interrupt.
- Use the opportunity to tell your own story.
- Make assumptions and jump to conclusions.
- Don’t allow the person time for silence and thoughtfulness.
- Try to “fix” the situation by offering solutions without hearing the feelings that lie beneath the surface.

## Active Listening

Communication skills are essential to the helping process. They enable you to not only hear the words the person you are supporting is saying, but to understand the meaning behind the words.

Active listening involves listening to and gaining an understanding of:

- The thoughts behind the words people use.
- The relationship between people’s feelings and actions.
- Each person in the context of their unique situation.

The following six principles are essential to active listening:

1. **Sympathy vs. Empathy** - Sympathy implies a “put down” or silently saying to yourself, “Thank goodness it isn’t me.” Empathy implies that you understand and can say to yourself, “I understand this person’s perspective.”
  2. **Universality of Feelings** - We all have felt pain, fear, anger, etc., at some time in our lives. Even if we cannot readily identify with the person’s specific problem, the specifics of the problem are often less important than the feelings about the problem.
  3. **Problem Ownership** - Remember that the person you are supporting “owns” the problem, not you. It is not your job to solve the problem, but rather to offer tools that will help the person to solve it.
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4. **Listening for Feelings** - In order to build trust, you must convey that you understand and accept feelings. Statements like, “It sounds like you’re scared right now...” or “This seems very frustrating for you...” indicate that you have some understanding of the situation and encourage further clarification.
5. **Listening for Values** - When listening, try to figure out what is important to the person you are supporting. People usually worry about things that are important to them, or which they feel threatened about losing. Paying attention to these values can help you identify helpful options and resources for them to pursue. For example, someone who says, “I am letting my family down. I missed my daughter’s school concert because I forgot about it,” values commitment to family. You can use this value to help the person rearrange priorities to better meet commitments. Sometimes, even just validating that you recognize the person’s values will strengthen the bond you have with them.
6. **Non-judgmental Attitude** - Try to remember that feelings expressed by people are neither right nor wrong — they are feelings and everyone has a right to feel the way they do.

### The Commonality of Experiences

During your conversations, issues or concerns you have in common with the person you are supporting may come up. These issues may include:

- Your personal history with MS
- Concerns about current symptoms
- The impact of MS on family and friends
- Profound feelings of sadness, anger, and fear that have not been shared with others
- Requests for information (usually medical, alternative treatments, or social services)

You may be bombarded with questions. This could be a sign of anxiety or fear, or just a need for information. Questions and avoidance of talking about the situation may mask real concerns. If this is the case, refocus the conversation back to the person or gently ask about the situation.

The goal is to establish trust, so the person feels safe talking to you. Trust takes time to develop, and the person may not be ready to be completely open in the beginning.

If your experiences don’t mirror those of the program participant, you can still use your active listening skills to guide conversations and provide support.

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## Building Trust through Your Responses

It is important to listen carefully, clarify the information stated, and respond appropriately to have a better understanding of what is going on. This must be done before exploring deeper feelings associated with a situation.

You are responding appropriately when you:

- Confirm the accuracy of what was said.
- Encourage more elaboration of information for better understanding.
- Understand the underlying feelings being conveyed.

Effective techniques of responding include:

- Restating
- Reflecting
- Probing
- Reframing
- Summarizing
- Limited self-disclosure
- Sharing information

## Techniques & Potential Phrases/Responses

**Restating** is repeating what was said in your own words. The use of this technique focuses on the content part of the message and gives the person an opportunity to agree or disagree with your response. If you restate the information accurately, the person will feel understood and not judged. If you misunderstood and were not accurate in responding, more information and clarification can be offered.

If a person says, "I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to live alone much longer."

Restating response: "Are you saying that you're worried about your ability to live independently?"

**Reflecting** is a technique that expresses the underlying feelings revealed in the person's statement. The use of reflecting statements focuses on the affect or emotional part of the message and is used to encourage the person to express more feelings.

If a person says, "I don't want to get a cane; it will make me look funny."

Reflecting response: "Tell me more about what it means for you to use a cane; you sound upset."

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**Probing** is gentle questioning that elicits more information and clarity. Asking for more information, through open-ended questions, allows the person to feel understood and heard. An open-ended question begins with:

- What
- How
- When
- Where
- Who

Never start a question with why, as it may imply responsibility for what has happened and imparts blame.

If a person says, “Sometimes I’m so stiff I just don’t want to do anything.”

Probing Response: “When does this usually occur?” “What do you do when this happens?” “When did this happen before?” “How was this like the other time?”

At times, it is just as valuable to make a statement rather than asking a question. Sometimes restating or reflecting encourages more disclosure. Remember to relax — if you are listening carefully, you will have a good feeling about when it might be appropriate to probe into deeper issues.

**Reframing** involves restating what has been shared from a different perspective, usually in a positive and supportive manner. Reframing can help you get free from an emotional rut and discover other ways to perceive a situation. The intended purpose of the technique is to help build an awareness of personal strengths and develop self-confidence.

If a person says, “I have to change everything! I can’t even use the same coffee cup anymore. I need one that is lighter with a large handle.”

Reframing response: “It is difficult, I know, but it sounds like you are learning to make things easier for yourself.”

If overused, reframing can send the message that you did not hear the problem. Be sensitive to reactions when using this technique and be sure that you are not reframing the statement to avoid dealing with uncomfortable issues.

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**Summarizing** is stating what happened during the current conversation, or in past calls, to show how a situation has evolved. It provides a sense of closure and helps put things in perspective, while at the same time looking at next steps. Summarizing may be used to point out a pattern of behavior that is holding someone back or creating a painful situation. Summarizing can also be used to point out the progress and positive changes that have been made and help to bolster self-image.

Summarizing response: “We have talked about a lot of things today: how helpless you feel when you see your children behaving in ways you don’t like, but most of all we’ve talked about how hard it is for you to disagree or speak up for yourself for fear you will lose the people you depend on and care about. Next call we can talk more about this.” Or, “In the past weeks we have talked about your fear of having to use a wheelchair, and your embarrassment, but you took steps to get a prescription from your doctor and make plans to go to the museum with your children using a chair. You have taken such big steps.”

**Limited self-disclosure** can also be a valuable technique. The intent of the peer relationship is not to provide you with a place to share your experiences, but a place where the person you are helping can share. This includes sharing fears, anger, and concerns; providing a place to be heard; and not being judged or given gratuitous advice.

However, during the relationship there will be opportunities and situations that make it both appropriate and necessary for you to share your feelings and experiences. When, how, and what is shared is your decision. This technique can be particularly useful to:

- Encourage an open and relaxed atmosphere.
- Help demonstrate similarities and common experiences.
- Through modeling, encourage a greater level of disclosure.

The key is to remember to keep the conversation focused on the person’s issues.

If a person says, “I have always been pretty optimistic, but lately I have just felt so angry at myself because I can’t keep up like I used to. I know I shouldn’t feel this way...it must just be a phase I’m going through.”

Self-Disclosing response: “There are times when I feel angry at myself too, for the things I can’t do. It’s a normal feeling even though I know my limitations are not my fault.”

You should also keep in mind that you can share your experiences about medications, symptoms or medical care but never provide advice. Always indicate that this is what your experience is, but everyone’s experience can be very different.

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**Sharing information** is providing facts, data, or resources without giving advice (teaching vs. preaching). There are times when sharing information can benefit to the relationship:

- When information can help identify previously unknown options or alternatives.
- When information can help to evaluate different choices and actions.
- When information can clarify invalid or erroneous data or to dispel a myth.

You should consider when, what, and how to share information:

- **When** - recognizing the person's desire for information –and that they may not want it even if you want to provide it!
- **What** - determining what kinds of information could be beneficial and where to find it.
- **How** - discussing the information in a way that it will be useful and heard.

If a person says, "I can't understand why I'm so tired. All I did was lie outside to get a tan. Is this from MS?"

Sharing Information response: "Heat frequently affects people with MS more than it does others. Many people find it helpful to plan their day around the heat." (To strengthen the communication, you can also share your own experience with heat.) Remember to refer the person to the Society to discuss available resources for heat sensitivity.

## Potential Roadblocks to Communication

When people are experiencing a problem, it is natural to want to help by giving advice, teaching from your own experience, or questioning to get at the facts. Despite all your good intentions, these efforts can actually impede the flow of communication, making the person feel as if you aren't interested or not respectful of the feelings being expressed.

Therefore, it is important to avoid the following:

**Advising, Providing Answers or Solutions** ("What you should do is...." "Why don't you...?" "It would be best for you....")

People do not necessarily want advice even though they asked for it. Advice implies "superiority" and can make people feel inadequate and inferior. If the person you are supporting doesn't agree with the advice, they have to argue against it and spend time dealing with the advice rather than thinking about solutions.

Advice can also make people feel dependent; it does not encourage creative thinking or people may simply respond by feeling that you just don't understand: "How could you suggest that? You just don't know how upset I am!" Also, if the advice turns out to be wrong, the person can shirk responsibility for the situation. "You suggested it; it wasn't my idea."

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**Directing, Ordering, Commanding** (“You must...” “You have to...” “You will...”)

Such responses can produce fright, active resistance and hostility because nobody likes to be ordered around. These responses may also cut off any further communication from the person or provoke defensive or retaliatory communication. However, if the person follows your directions or commands, they may become dependent or blame you when things don’t work out.

**Warning, Threatening, Admonishing** (“You had better...” “If you don’t, then...”)

Such responses are like directing or ordering except that the element of threat is added. This type of response may produce extreme resistance and rebellion.

**Moralizing, Preaching, Obliging** (“You should...” “You are required...”)

These kinds of responses are like directing and ordering, with an added hint of duty and some vague, external authority. These types of responses often make a person feel guilty or obliged and communicate a lack of trust in their own wisdom and judgment.

**Persuading, Arguing, Instructing, Lecturing** (“Do you realize...?” “Here is why you are wrong...” “That is not right...” “Yes, but...”)

Such responses can provoke defensiveness and often elicit counter arguments. They can also make people feel inferior because they imply your superiority. Persuasion, more often than not, simply makes people defend their own position more strongly.

**Evaluating, Judging, Disapproving, Blaming, Name-Calling, Criticizing** (“You are not thinking straight/clearly...” “You are acting foolishly...”)

More than any other type of message, this makes people feel inadequate, inferior, incompetent, stupid, or guilty. People will tend to react defensively to this kind of communication because nobody likes to be wrong.

**Reassuring** (“It’s not so bad....” “Don’t worry; everything will be all right...”)

Reassurance can sometimes make a person feel that you don’t understand: “That’s easy for you to say, but you don’t know how awful I feel.” Reassuring statements can also convey your own feelings of helplessness or discomfort: “I’m having a hard time with your distress, so you need to start feeling better.” In addition, if things do not “turn out all right,” then the person can feel resentful toward you for your misleading reassurances.

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**Diagnosing, Analyzing, Interpreting** (“What you need is...” “You don’t really mean that...” “I know what you need...” “Your problem is...”)

Telling a person what their “real” feelings or motives are, or the reasons for their behaviors, can be very threatening. If your analysis is wrong, you will see resistance; if correct, the person can feel exposed and trapped. Interpretations are often more likely to stop communication than encourage it.

**Questioning, Probing, Cross-Examining, Prying** (“Why...?”)

The response to probing is often to feel defensive or “on the witness stand.” Rapid-fire questions are threatening because the person may feel unable to give the right answers. Although you may need to ask questions to fully engage in supporting this person, you need to be careful not to overload the person with questions all at once.

## Takeaways

As a Peer Connections Volunteer (i.e. MSFriends® volunteer or Self Help Group Leader), you should:

- Listen actively to the information provided by the person you are supporting.
- Assist in clarifying the problem or question.
- Help identify potential strategies or resources.

If you are talking more than the other person is, stop and ask yourself why. Whose needs are being met — the participant’s or your own?

Ask questions when you need more information about what is being told or asked. Once you have a clear understanding of the problem or question, you can begin to provide information, strategy options, and/or possible resources to choose from. The goal of the process is to provide a listening ear first and then to educate and empower people to deal with the challenges they are facing.

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