

Listening Using Open & Honest Questions

for VIRCS Listening Skills Webinar -- March 30, 2020

This method supports listening to anyone, from strangers to close family. It is designed by Parker Palmer, founder of the [Center for Courage & Renewal](#) and customized for this webinar by [Lisa Gordon](#), Courage & Renewal facilitator.

Basic principles: Assume that everyone has their own inner wisdom. Our role is to lovingly witness the person as they listen to and share their inner wisdom. We are not listening to solve a problem. We will benefit equally from the exchange. If anyone has more power, it is the person you are listening to. They set the pace and choose the words.

Open means leaving room in your questions for them to go any direction they want and not assuming anything about the other person, even if you know them.

Honest means your question has no hidden motive and does not demand a particular kind of answer. Be honest about your own motivation. Maybe even share it so the person understands you better. The intention to “help” can be a barrier.

DO:

- ✧ Take time to listen to your own body / heart / inner wisdom before and during listening to / holding space for others.
- ✧ Keep breathing deeply (or do what you need to stay present / grounded / open / connected to your inner wisdom).
- ✧ In your heart (before you start and during the conversation), hold the person “able.” Their inner wisdom is there, but may be shy or private.
- ✧ Be aware of your intentions / agenda / curiosity. This is not about you.
- ✧ Keep a gentle and spacious pace. Let the silence do the heavy lifting.
- ✧ Ask questions using words you heard the person say. Using their language builds trust that you are listening well and allows the person to go deeper.
- ✧ Respond with “Yes” in your heart, building on what they said.
- ✧ Trust the person to lead the conversation where they need it to go.
- ✧ Laugh / cry / sigh. Let the person know they have moved you without drawing attention to yourself.
- ✧ Close the conversation by thanking them for the connection and what kind of difference they made to you/ what you learned from them / a specific thing you appreciate about them.
- ✧ Schedule another conversation if they seem open to it.

DON'T:

- ✧ Start the conversation until you feel grounded and open. (You might feel heavy or tired, but not too sad, anxious, hungry, distracted or frustrated.)
- ✧ Assume you know what they need or feel (especially if you know them.)
- ✧ Ask questions that require Yes / No or Right / Wrong answers.
- ✧ Judge, disagree or contradict statements of fact or feeling. Use gentle curiosity instead. ("Tell me more.")
- ✧ Interrupt (except briefly with encouragement or appreciation).
- ✧ Introduce, interpret or add new language. If they said "worried," don't escalate the language to "fear."
- ✧ Fix, save, advise or counsel, esp. with medical advice. (If they ask for advice, tell them you'll take a note and offer resources at the end.)
- ✧ Offer advice hidden as a question. (E.g. Does your family know about that?)
- ✧ Push the person to explain if you don't understand what they said. It's more important that they understand themselves.
- ✧ Draw attention to yourself or others in your question or responses.
- ✧ Talk unless it improves upon the silence. You could even say. "I'd enjoy sitting silently with you until you have something more you want to say."

Sample Open & Honest Questions:

- ✧ *On the phone or online:* Tell me about where you are sitting / what you see out the window / what you were doing before this conversation?
- ✧ What is the most difficult aspect (of these times)?
- ✧ What is the easiest aspect of (these times) for you?
- ✧ What parts (of these times) are familiar to you / what is similar that you have experienced before?
- ✧ Did you learn anything from that earlier experience that feels useful to you now?
- ✧ What are you learning from (these times)?
- ✧ What surprises you most (good or bad) (about these times)?
- ✧ Who do you trust, who can you rely on (in these times)? Any surprises?
- ✧ You said you felt X. Could you say more about what this is like for you?
- ✧ You said you miss X (person / activity). Tell me more about how X is special to you (person / activity). If you could be at / with X now, what would you do / say?
- ✧ What do you enjoy doing now?
- ✧ *If they say they love music:* What kind of music would you choose as the soundtrack to (these times)?
- ✧ *If they say they love reading / writing:* If you were reading / writing a book (about these times), what would the book title be?
- ✧ *If they express hope or fear:* tell me more about your hopes / fears (about these times)?

Some inspiration for deep listening

“Listening is an act of love”

~StoryCorps founder, David Isay

“When we seek for connection, we restore the world to wholeness. Our seemingly separate lives become meaningful as we discover how truly necessary we are to each other.”

~Margaret Wheatley

“Engrave this upon your heart: there isn’t anyone you couldn’t love once you heard their story.”

~Benedictine nun, Mary Lou Kownacki

“We make our world significant by the courage of our questions and by the depth of our answers.”

~Carl Sagan

“I’ve never known a person who did not feel honored by the fact that someone cares for them enough to ask a meaningful question — and then listen deeply and well to whatever they have to say.”

~Courage & Renewal founder, Parker Palmer

“Good questions work on us, we don’t work on them. they are not a project to be completed but a doorway opening onto greater depth of understanding, actions that will take us into being more fully alive.”

~Peter Block

“Ask open and honest questions, ones you don’t know the answer to. Do this over and over again until you build the muscle memory of respectful and civil and truthful conversation, until you create a new pattern of interacting that is healthy and whole and second nature to you”

~Susan M. Glisson

“When you listen generously to people, they can hear the truth in themselves, often for the very first time. And in the silence of listening, you can know yourself in everyone.”

~Rachel Naomi Reme

“Everything is an obligation to everything that lives. Come back to the sweet world where all flourishing is mutual.”

~Laurence Cole