

Whole Body Listening

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A common question to explore communication skills is, “How well do you listen?” But there is a deeper and more meaningful question that is rarely asked: “*How* do you listen?” With your ears? Your eyes? Your feelings? Your senses? What does it mean to listen with your whole body?

Whole body listening is using your mind, your feelings, and all of your senses to create meaning and understanding. Consider the image of an iceberg: Only 10% of the body of ice is visible above the water line, with the larger 90% hidden under water, making it easy to mistake the tip of the iceberg for the whole iceberg. Now consider the human body in the same way: Many people will point to their head, ears and eyes as their point of listening, but that is only the tip of the iceberg! What about the rest of the body below the neckline? Our bodies are finely-tuned instruments designed to provide us with powerfully subtle levels of information about ourselves, other people, and our environment. The real work in developing our listening abilities is to begin broadening our awareness of not only what we are hearing through words, but what we are feeling and sensing through our whole body.

Present Moment Awareness

Whole body listening begins with an intention to keep our focus and attention in the “now” and on what is happening in the present moment. Information flows into our awareness at multiple levels, and maintaining an undistracted, calm, in-the-moment awareness helps us to pay attention to subtle levels of guidance and information that may otherwise go unnoticed in the course of our busy, often-distracted lives. Two very effective steps that can be taken to expand present moment awareness are:

Practice periods of silence. Let your mind rest from the buzz of electronics, television, the internet, iPods, and cell phones. Give yourself space to sit in silence and breathe. Take a walk with your senses free to notice what is happening around you and listen to the symphony of sounds from nature flowing continuously in and out of your awareness. Breathe deeply and train your nose to detect the lightest scents in the air. Turn your attention to people around you and train your eyes to see the most subtle expressions in their faces. Give yourself pockets of silence throughout the day to refresh your mind and senses and come fully into the present moment where all of the most important and often subtle information is contained.

Do one thing at a time and give it your whole attention. Despite the desire many of us have to multi-task, trying to do more than one thing at a time actually diminishes our effectiveness to do any one thing well, especially when it comes to communication and listening with our whole body. If you are talking with someone on the phone, give that person your full attention without checking email, watching tv, or making dinner. When you are with your partner, child, or a friend, turn and give that person your whole attention. Tune in to the tone of the other person’s voice, notice what is being said and how it is being said. Pay attention to their body language and expressions, and tune in to what you are feeling and sensing during the conversation. Allow your whole body to be engaged in what you are experiencing by giving each conversation your whole attention.

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The Power of Empathy

Plato said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle”. Empathy is our built-in natural ability to understand one another’s “hard battle”. Through empathy, we use our whole body to listen in a powerful way - - to move our mind and feelings into the experience of another in order to understand from our own perspective what they may be experiencing. Empathy is our connecting point with humanity. And while we can never fully understand the exact experience of another, we can use our mind, feelings and senses to create new understanding of what another is experiencing by simply asking the question, “*What would I think and feel if that were my experience?*”

For example, imagine that your friend or family member has experienced a difficult situation that has affected them very deeply. Giving the person your full attention, listen as they share the story of what happened, and as they share their experience, begin to imagine what you might have experienced if that was your situation, using your body to sense and feel what that experience might have been like if you were in it. Through this simple but powerful technique, you are connecting with the other person and creating understanding of their experience in a deeper way.

Using your new perspective, you are in an important position to offer support and encouragement in a way that communicates true understanding, both verbally and non-verbally. Asking open-ended questions signals that you are listening and paying attention to what is being communicated. Simple, open-ended questions, such as, “*How did you feel when that happened?*”, and “*What would you like to see happen differently in that situation?*” let the other person know that you are interested in and care about their experience. You may even choose to share any intuitive insights that may have arisen inside of you as you were listening by saying, “If that were my experience, this is what comes up inside of me...” or, “If that were my experience, this would be something that I would be thinking about...”. As you come from your own perspective, you are allowing the other person the freedom to use your insights to assist in their own understanding of their feelings and experience.

Whole body listening helps us to exercise more of the potential of our magnificent body and gain deeper insight, intuition and understanding into our own and others’ experiences. When we practice listening with our whole body, we are connecting with ourselves and others in fresh, new ways and developing important bonds of trust and respect that can last a lifetime. Most importantly, we are giving one of the greatest gifts we can give to another - - the experience of feeling deeply understood.

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