

## Ask Your Therapist

By Krishnabai, MSW, LICSW, the Ashby Center for Counseling

### **How To Communicate: the art of actively listening**

Such a simple thing: we open up our mouths and words pour out. Such a difficult thing: to say what we really mean to say.

Communicating can be broken down into listening and speaking. Let's talk about listening first. The most important part of listening is actually paying attention to what is being said to you and not allowing your own thoughts, feelings and reactions to block your ears, and not getting defensive or offensive or thinking about other things (Did I mail the rent cheque or did I leave it on the counter?) For example, if you are a stay at home parent of young children and someone starts telling you how difficult their life is at their cushy job or the problems they are having getting their bridge club to meet regularly, you might hear the first two or three sentences and have an emotional reaction inside such as (Difficult??? You want to know about difficult???) and turn your attention to mentally rehearsing what you want to say once the person takes a breath and you can butt into their monologue. You have essentially turned a deaf ear to them after the first few sentences. You would likely have missed it when they mentioned that they are worried about being fired/laid off or that their own parent is now living with them and is constantly criticizing their parenting and the only time they can get out of the house and breathe is to go to their bridge club!

So how do you pay attention? First of all, listen to the words as they are being spoken and look at the person who is speaking, preferably in the eyes. Be an active listener by nodding your head or in some way indicating that you are hearing and understanding what is being said to you. "Oh, hmmm, I see, really!, OK, got it, wow", and other simple expressions are cues you give to the speaker to convey that you are really paying attention. Keep track of what is being said. If you have questions or comments, hold them until the person gets done with the main point. And keep the focus on what was said. If someone is talking about her frustrations in setting limits about the kitchen stove with her kids while she was making a chocolate cake, this is not the time to ask her for the recipe for the cake.

Don't commit Conversation Robbery! Here is an example. A friend is talking about a conversation with a mutual friend who was unexpectedly grumpy and curt. The listener interrupts and says "That same thing happened to me with her and this is what happened..." The listener grabbed the focus of the conversation and changed the focus to herself. That is robbery! It is fine to say "Oh, I really understand" but don't steal the focus! It is better for the listener to let the speaker talk it out and then add your experience.

And don't interrupt! Put your hand over your mouth if you need to, but don't do it!

Next month: Part 2: Speaking Your Truth.

If you want to ask a question that may be answered in a generalized way in a future column, or if you want to reach me via the Internet, go to my web site [www.Krishnabai.com](http://www.Krishnabai.com) or email me at [csaccfc@aol.com](mailto:csaccfc@aol.com).

Krishnabai, MSW is a therapist in Ashby and Wellesley Hills where she sees adults, older teens and couples. The core of her work is the discovery and expression of the Authentic Self. She focuses on the identification, expression, and resolution of emotions, commitment to honesty and the use of remedial education and information.

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