



What's the Deal on Deep Listening?

by Lori Hewitt

“Being truly heard and having our true selves accepted for who we really are is vital to our healthy emotional and psychological state.” ~ Michelle Fowler

Have you ever spoken to someone who made you feel as if you were the only person in the room? That your opinions, feelings and thoughts matter? How did that impact you? Did you feel understood, validated and valued? Deep listening connects us to others quite like nothing else, and as social beings, we are wired for connection. The need to be heard is one of the most basic needs we have and truly listening to others is one of the most important gifts we can offer.

As educators, you already know the value and importance of communication and the impact on your students' healthy development and well-being. As Sam Osherson writes, research indicates that “skilled teachers who foster relationships with their students produce students who achieve more.. and the key to a strong relationship is deep listening.”

But did you know that deep listening also benefits you as the listener and has a positive impact on the relationship between the listener and the recipient (whether it be a student, partner, child, or friend)? From this perspective, deep listening is an investment not only in others but also in ourselves and our relationships.

Deep listening does not come easily or naturally to many of us. In fact, most of us must work at it—a lot! Stern and Samson surmise that it may even seem counterintuitive in our world of quick clicks, quick fixes and quick solutions, but the benefits are plentiful. Switching gears from multi-tasking to being mindful and truly present with another person offers inner stillness, compassion and connectivity. Thankfully, it is a skill that does not require perfection, but rather awareness and practice.

According to Roger K. Allen, deep listening can be defined as “suspending judgement and being fully present with another person to understand his or her experience or point of view.” Deep listening involves more than hearing and acknowledging the words

of the speaker, it taps into the deeper meaning, the unspoken needs, as well as the feelings conveyed. “It is something that is done with the **heart** as well as the mind.”

When we choose to be present with the other person, we learn, grow, and connect. Deep listening is an interchange between two people where we do more than respond to the content and the words we've heard. There is a difference between “listening to respond” and “listening to understand.” We don't interrupt, correct, lecture or offer advice. We must find a way to avoid the temptation to formulate a response while the other person is speaking. This practice can be energy-draining for us and dismissive for the other person. When this happens (and it inevitably will), we can internally acknowledge without judgement what is occurring and bring ourselves back to listening.

When we do respond, we should respond mindfully. This can mean asking follow-up questions that demonstrate understanding or summarizing what the other person has said to confirm accuracy, not only of content but also of underlying need and meaning. Responding mindfully shows that our intent and interest is with the other person, as opposed to imposing our own agenda.

A few weeks ago, I met a friend for coffee. I had considered rescheduling as I had a demanding day and was feeling run down. She also had a rough day, and while I knew she just needed a listening ear and a supportive shoulder, I found myself formulating what I would say and how I would “problem solve.” I noticed I was getting anxious and inevitably cut her off mid-sentence to offer “wisdom and advice.” It was at that moment I realized I was not really listening. I hadn't paid attention to her body posture, eye gaze or gestures. Similarly, I hadn't paid attention to my own feelings of tiredness and agitation. Once I realized and acknowledged this, I took a deep breath, refocused and noticed a shift.

Self-Awareness

We are unlikely to listen deeply if we are not in tune with our own thoughts and feelings. In addition to having an interest in what others have to say, deep listening requires self-regulation, mental stamina and energy. In the example above, I was able to engage with my friend more genuinely once I took stock of my own emotions, thoughts and actions. As a result, a greater conversation and connection occurred. Self-awareness involves listening to ourselves. Couple this with mindful and deep listening, and collaboration and greater connectivity can occur.

Learning to Listen Deeply

As the saying goes, practice makes perfect. Practicing deep listening builds and strengthens our capacity to listen. Every day we are presented with opportunities to practice being present with others. Here are some tips to help further develop this skill:

- 1. Connect with yourself first.** Connecting with ourselves and our own experiences is important. When we have self-awareness, it becomes easier to connect deeply with others. Recognizing and naming our feelings enables us to respond to our own needs, which is crucial for inner connection. Begin each day with a self check in, paying attention to your feelings and thoughts. Are they positive or negative? What's triggering them? Are you impacted by external, internal or hidden stressors? Working on self-awareness and learning to talk to your inner self with compassion and kindness is time well spent.
- 2. Make time.** We are all busy, and getting busier it seems! But deep listening requires our time. It might help to be intentional with your time and build regular scheduled check ins with those close to you. For some, this may mean family dinners or dedicated and regular weeknight moments to touch base. It may also mean being aware of the day-to-day moments that arise, where we can shut off the internal and external noise and just be present. Regardless of what it might look like for you, the important thing is to create the space and opportunity and make the time for deep listening.
- 3. Minimize distractions.** Do you consider yourself a multi-tasker? Many of us have become experts at splitting our attention between multiple tasks and demands. And while there are some occasions where this might be necessary, deep listening requires our full mind, attention and heart. I'm sure we can all recall a time when we were engaged in a conversation with someone who was distracted. Do you remember how this made you feel? Annoyed? Not heard? Not validated?

Even very young children can tell when the adults in their lives are distracted. "Research shows that parent's increased distraction can negatively impact a child's development." Alternately, "evidence shows us that attuned, sensitive, and emotionally available caregiving promotes healthy development, secure attachment, and positive mental health." A good place to start is by putting down your phone and focusing on being present.

When I look back on the relationships that I value the most, they are the ones in which I have felt truly listened to. These relationships have helped me feel valued, confident and heard. They offered transformation and growth. Perhaps it is through our presence and willingness to listen deeply that we offer those around us the greatest gift of all.

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Employee Assistance Program
for teachers

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