

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is the most important tool in crisis line support. An advocate's primary task is listening closely and reflecting back what the caller has just said. It is a continuing process of clarification and reflection. As an advocate, you gather information and feelings using your senses and experience to understand. Such attention signals respect.

Active listening is a learned skill requiring energy, concentration, and practice of specific techniques. It is not the same as simply hearing and replying. The advocate works to comprehend, reflect, and respond to the caller's words and feelings instead of passively hearing the caller's words.

Techniques for Active Listening

- **Behave as a good listener.** Be alert and focused on the caller. Even though the caller cannot see you, your body language can be conveyed by your tone of voice. Sit up. Use facial expressions even on the phone as they help project the tone.
- **Share responsibility for communicating.** If you cannot understand what a caller is trying to say, ask for clarification. If you cannot hear the caller, ask the caller politely to speak louder. If the caller is too upset to talk, the caller can practice deep breathing or choose to be silent. The advocate should learn to be comfortable with silence.
- **Monitor negative or defensive reactions.** React to what the caller is trying to say, as opposed to how the caller is saying it (choice of words, tone).
- **Be "in the moment" with the caller.** Think about what the caller is saying rather than planning how you will respond.
- **Pay attention to body language and voice tones.** Is the caller sitting, pacing, shaking, balling up fists, not breathing? The body often conveys information not spoken. Voice tone can reveal unspoken feelings. Focus your attention on the caller's ideas, tone, pitch, and breathing.
- **Pay as much attention to what a caller is implying as to what is being said.** Many people feel safer expressing themselves indirectly through innuendo, metaphor, and analogy. Be sensitive and unafraid to ask for clarification if a meaning is too vague, or to ask if an interpretation you have made is correct.
- **Keep your emotions separate from the caller's.** You will often feel what a caller is feeling and that is an important part of empathy. Try not to get distracted by your own responses.
- **Stop talking.** In most communication, we are in the habit of feeling 50% or more responsible, for keeping a conversation going. In crisis counseling, the goal is to listen. Your contribution to the conversation is minimal. If a caller chooses to be silent, let them. Simply being present is enough.

- **Avoid spontaneous responses.** Let the caller talk. Make sure that the caller is feeling heard before moving on.
- **Be concise.** Say what you have to say in as few words as possible. Paraphrasing and summarizing will help provide clarity.
- **Use minimal encouragers.** Use phrases such as “uh huh,” “I see,” “oh, I understand,” and “sure” to prompt the caller to keep talking and convey that you are listening. However, DO NOT overuse them. If overused, a caller may feel as though you are bored, disengaged, or otherwise not listening.
- **Use broad openers.** Encourage dialogue with phrases like “tell me about it,” “let’s discuss that,” “this seems like something important to you,” “can you tell me more about...,” and “go ahead, I’m listening.”
- **Use open-ended questions.** To facilitate information sharing, ask “what” and “how” questions. Open-ended questions will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.
- **Avoid using too many questions in a row.** You do not want to come off as an inquisitor by asking too much.

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