

Guidelines for Empathic Listening



Madelyn Burley-Allen offers these guidelines for empathic listening:

1. Be attentive. Be interested. Be alert and not distracted. Create a positive atmosphere through nonverbal behavior.
2. Be a sounding board -- Allow the speaker to bounce ideas and feelings off you while assuming a nonjudgmental, non-critical manner.
3. Don't ask a lot of questions. They can give the impression you are "grilling" the speaker.
4. Act like a mirror -- reflect back what you think the speaker is saying and feeling.
5. Don't discount the speaker's feelings by using stock phrases like "It's not that bad," or "You'll feel better tomorrow."
6. Don't let the speaker "hook" you. This can happen if you get angry or upset, allow yourself to get involved in an argument, or pass judgment on the other person.
7. Indicate you are listening by
 - Providing brief, noncommittal acknowledging responses, e.g., "Uh-huh," "I see."
 - Giving nonverbal acknowledgements, e.g., head nodding, facial expressions matching the speaker, open and relaxed body expression, eye contact.
 - Invitations to say more, e.g., "Tell me about it," "I'd like to hear about that."
8. Follow good listening "ground rules:"
 - Don't interrupt.
 - Don't change the subject or move in a new direction.
 - Don't rehearse in your own head.
 - Don't interrogate.
 - Don't teach.
 - Don't give advice.
 - **Do** reflect back to the speaker what you understand and how you think the speaker feels.

The ability to listen with empathy may be the most important attribute of interveners who succeed in gaining the trust and cooperation of parties to intractable conflicts and other disputes with high emotional content. Empathic listening has empowering qualities. Providing an opportunity for people to talk through their problem may clarify their thinking as well as provide a necessary emotional release.