

Listening Skills

Arguably, the most important thing a Sponsor can do is listen to us. So often, we already have the solution to our problems and it come out as we talk if someone listens to us. So often, the most useful thing they can do is simply to give us a chance to express the feelings that might lead us to overeat.

OA already provides training in the most important skill for effective communications in most of its meetings, at least all the ones I have attended in 32 years. We give each other the timed, uninterrupted listening turns with permission to express feelings even strong ones. In OA we call these “shares.”

The power of such turns is generally increased by the amount of similarity among those taking turns. In our case, it is a shared addiction. In other communities it may be similarity in gender or life situation such as a divorce or loss of a loved one. These similarities can be magnified. Indeed, in OA, there are such similarity groups in addition to our shared addiction to increase the power of our sharing. Examples are meetings for men, African-heritage people and LGBTQ. Our secular meetings are exactly that.

That shared listening skill is widely utilized and advocated outside OA in many other programs, communities and practices. I have used it in Reevaluation Counseling for almost 40 years. Indeed, for five years, I took this basic skill from OA and co-counseling to over 4,000 returning US veterans of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan including 85 residential weekend workshops in a very large project to deal with PTSD. Basically, I taught them to take turns listening to each other talk about what had happened in the war. In a peer-reviewed evaluation, their PTSD improved, they trusted people more and they were more self-confident.

Sometimes, these timed turns are called “listening turns, dyads or pairs” and sometimes “sessions”

It is worth noting that not all the other 12 Step programs use this tool in their meetings. Instead, some rely on “popcorn” formats where the people who want to talk, get to, and they speak as long as they want. Personally, I couldn’t take it!

As in an OA Meeting, a Listener does not have to say anything. It is usually enough look at the person talking and keep a generally pleased expression on your face. It is helpful every once in a while to make an understanding sound, such as “uh huh.”

Indeed, in RC, we have a practice called a “think and listen” where the listener tries to keep a blank look on their face and not to give any indication of approval or disapproval of the content. It is amazing the great ideas people come up with.

An interesting thing happens if you keep listening and do not interrupt someone talking. Sooner or later, the person being listened to will bring up topics or aspects of a topic which carry some emotion.

The great mistake society generally teaches us is that expressing feelings is bad. The first reaction most people have been taught is to “josh” the talker out of crying.

We know better in OA. If you have been around for awhile, you will almost certainly been in a meeting where someone started to cry during their share. That has certainly happened even on line in these pandemics. I do lots of one on one listening turns via Zoom

There are a number of things that happen when people talk about emotional topics.

If the topic is sad, expressing grief, they will likely cry at some point.

If they are describing fear, they will often laugh and might even break into a cold sweat and tremble.

If they are angry, their face may flush and they may experience warm perspiration.

Oftentimes people will just start yawning.

There are physiological markers of these feelings.

If you continue to listen when emotional topics come, then people will generally keep going.

All of this is good.

If you keep listening to someone cry and do not try and distract their attention with reassurances or a drink or a chocolate bar, they will probably keep crying, or laughing or raging, whatever they need to do to express their feelings. The more you can let them do that, the more likely it is that they will think better about whatever they subject were talking about.

It is also true that people will tend to talk about things that happened earlier in their lives that are similar in some way and involve the same feelings. If someone dies, we often find ourselves talking about other people who have died. If we are afraid of something in the present, it will often lead us to talk about things that we were afraid of in the past, even in our early childhood.

Listening to all this is good.

When your agreed upon time is up, it is good to ask the person who was talking to tell you something positive in the present—especially if they have been talking about something emotional.

This is not a substitute for therapy. If someone starts talking about something you do not feel comfortable listening to, then don't. Interrupt and ask them to stop. Something that comes up a lot in OA is early sexual abuse. It is useful for someone to talk about any such experience. However, they at least should visit a 12 Step program for that topic or get professional therapy. If someone talks about suicide and has the means and a plan, call 911. These things almost never come up, even among those combat veterans, but I want you to know you have no obligation to listen to things you find triggering or worrisome.

Does some one have something they want to talk about for five minutes? Remember like everything else in OA, these listening turns are confidential.

OK, now we will break up and give everyone a chance to be listened to.

One of the greatest inventions in human history taking uninterrupted turns listening—and using a timer.