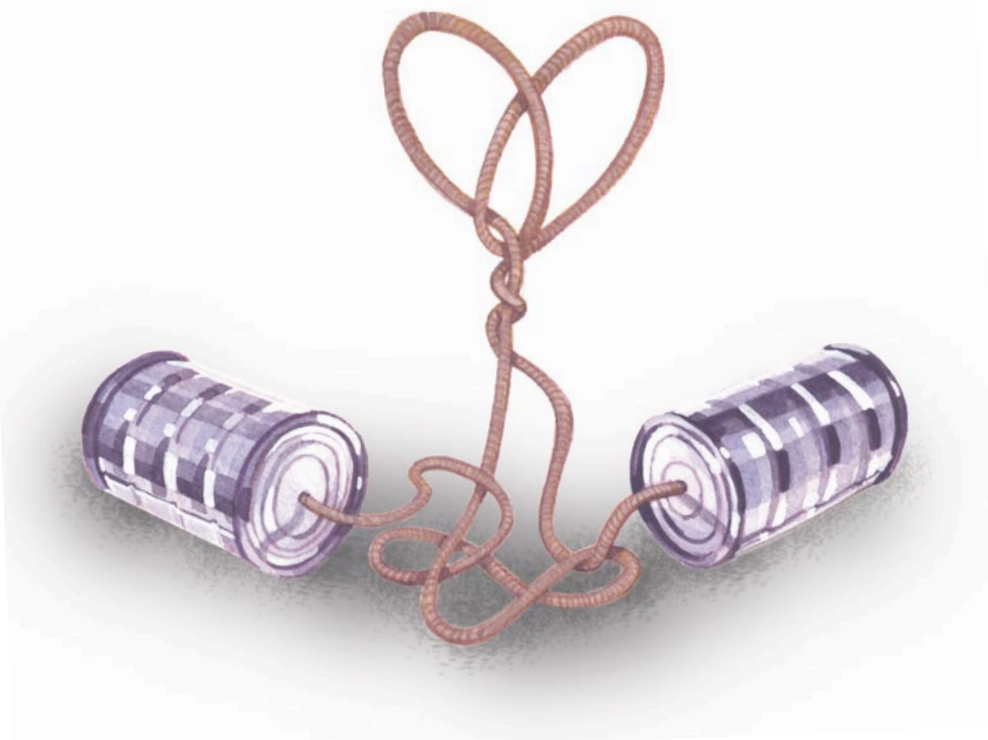


# Listening for a change

**Sandra Kimball** gives attention to the benefits of empathetic listening



**I**N TODAY'S INCREASINGLY FAST-paced world, paying sufficient attention to other people may take a bit more time and it definitely requires more commitment and motivation. However, empathetic listening pays off because it leads to noticeably more accurate communication. It can become a whole way of life that affects everything you do.

Recently, I ran into someone I hadn't seen in years. As we caught up with the latest news and the changing events in our lives, I was aware that although his exterior circumstances had substantially improved, he disclosed the same internal anxieties, financial worries, and artistic insecurities. Simultaneously, I noticed a pervasive voice in my head giving a running commentary with judgements like, "I've heard this boring old story a hundred times" and "When is he going to just get over it?" When we let that voice crowd our awareness, our ability to fully listen is compromised and the clarity that comes with paying attention spirals into chaos.

Trying to wrestle with this judgemental voice only gives it power. A more workable alternative is to observe it without taking it seriously. Eventually, the judgemental voice becomes quiet and we can set apart the differences between us and begin to appreciate the duties, demands, and insecurities the other might be facing.

It's common to project our interpretation of reality on to someone else, but it's more helpful if we step into his or her shoes and imagine what they might be feeling. You can make it your aim

to respectfully focus your full attention on the other and become aware of his or her actions, emotions and even how they might communicate depending on their cultural background.

Communication can take many forms and includes both verbal and non-verbal expression. Good listening skills are especially important when communicating with the people who are closest to us. When we're not listening but pretending we are, our body language sends a negative, non-verbal message and we lose connection with the other person. Our intimate partners, children and those who have authority over us, such as our bosses at work, are usually the easiest to turn off to, which in turn causes us the most immediate internal pandemonium.

A good way to get into resonance with someone else is to attend to their body language; their facial expressions, breathing, posture and tonality, and be aware of how it may differ from how we are feeling. We don't just pick up these details by listening with our ears or looking with our eyes; it's a total body response. We can practise taking in information through all the senses, the head, the heart, and the gut. Resistance to listening falls away when we release our personal agendas and avoid formulating a response while the other person is speaking. When the need to have an answer or a comeback on the ready vanishes, the right one will arise without effort.

There is a familiar but often hidden impediment to empathetic listening. We have to honestly ask ourselves if the need for approval from

the other sits uncomfortably in the middle of the dialogue and clouds the communication. Many times we stop listening because we put our energies into wanting the other person to see us in a certain way, which is usually intelligent, interested, and friendly.

When I was with my friend and that judgemental voice was secretly whispering that I wished he would stop whingeing about his worries, I decided to give him a compassionate and clarifying ear and move the conversation into a more positive and caring direction. I had to drop the position that I was right and he was wrong and instead of cutting him off, I took a breath, emptied the chatter in my mind and asked him to tell me more. Getting more information helped me to be better aware of what he was trying to communicate and may even have led him to an enhanced understanding of himself. A good listener can serve as a mirror for others, showing them parts of themselves that are out of view or out of focus.

Take time to recall those people in your life who you know to be good communicators. These are the people who connect with you and make you feel valued. When you know someone has listened to you fully, it feels like you've received one of the most empowering gifts. These are the people to use as role models.

Many years ago when I worked for Amnesty International, I had a colleague who secured the release of a prisoner of conscience. When in discussion with the prison warden, she asked him about his children in the photo on his desk. Her curiosity and courage initiated a dialogue that cleared the way for them to begin to hear each other without their usual defences. By dropping her judgements and agenda, she was able to find a common ground with someone who by all appearances was an adversary.

When we first start to pay more attention, listening invites the chaos of our own internal chatter. The paradox is that the deeper we listen, the quieter it becomes. And the quieter it is, the more we are capable of hearing something clearly as if for the first time. **KTO**

*Resources for better listening: [www.internationalcounseling.com](http://www.internationalcounseling.com)*