

Active Listening

Listening is perhaps our most important communication skill, especially when dealing with people who are distressed or in crisis. Listening is not a passive process. In fact, active listening doesn't just happen – it takes time and energy. Empathy requires that we “believe that people are fundamentally important and worth listening to, and that they are worthy of our time and attention” (Crisis Volunteer Training Manual, Klinic, 2001, p. 82).

Active listening also requires that we listen for both facts (what the other person is saying) and emotions (how they are feeling). You can show empathy without agreeing or disagreeing with a person. Too often we get caught up in the other person's strong emotions and feel we have to either side with them or confront them. Listener #2 is an example of good active listening:

Speaker: “I am so fed up with this whole BSE thing. My whole livelihood is at stake here, and you guys aren't doing anything to help me!”

Listener 1: “Why are you blaming us? We're doing the best we can!”

Listener 2: “You have worked hard to build up your herd. I know this must be difficult for you (and your family). It sounds like you're very frustrated and worried about the future.”

Active listening also requires that we “reflect back” or paraphrase what the person has said. We can also ask clarifying questions to ensure we understand them correctly and let them know that we care about what they are saying. For example, you might say: “It sounds like you're saying _____. Is that correct? Can you tell me more about that?”

Silence can indeed be golden. Many people need time to formulate their thoughts and/or are uncomfortable expressing their feelings. Don't feel you have to jump in and “do something” to break the silence. Just “being there” is often enough for the time being.

