



Caring about the quality of your relationships.
Brenda Montani, MSC. RCC

The Great Gift

Spouses, daughters and sons can often be heard complaining that the people who care about them the most don't really understand them. These people are communicating that they feel unloved or unimportant. The rational is, "How could someone love you if they don't understand you?"

What this often means is that these people aren't listened to in a way that makes them feel understood and cared about. Unfortunately this has more to do with the skill of listener than it does with their desire to love.

Listening to someone you care about in a way that makes him or her feel understood is a gift each of us is capable of giving. Effective listening skills are so instrumental to positive marriages that numerous books, workshops and courses are available to develop this attribute.

Part of the reason it's so difficult to implement is that the process gets

Broken down when there is discord. When we have an agenda we need to be heard which limits our capacity to listen well. We also are not formally taught how to listen. Much of our expertise consists of what we've picked up along the way. If our role models were effective we are likely to be more skilled than if they were limited.

Although this is a short lesson on listening I would encourage each of you to enhance your listening abilities, which in turn will enhance your relationships.

Firstly make the time to listen, without any distractions. If you are having a conversation that has some depth to it you need to be available with your time and your attention. Sometimes this means scheduling specific time in a quiet place.

If your intent is to understand your speaker it would be good to state this. It might sound something like this... "I know you're upset with something and I'd like to understand what that is. I would like to hear what you're thinking." You've just created the intent to focus on that individual setting aside your own thoughts and feelings on that issue for the time being. It's a difficult thing to do but the rewards in the end make it worthwhile.



Caring about the quality of your relationships.
Brenda Montani, MSC. RCC

Once you've engaged the speaker look for clues that indicate exactly how they're feeling about the topic and identify what you see. By using nonverbal clues such as body language you are able to achieve this. If you suspect an emotion name it for the speaker. It would sound something like this. "You seem to be overwhelmed with those responsibilities or I sense that there is some fear about taking that job." Even if you're wrong the speaker is given an opportunity to clarify what they are feeling. This offers a deeper understanding of the speaker's position. It also allows the speaker to explore his or her own thoughts and feelings. Your efforts will be appreciated.

An important aspect of listening is to paraphrase what the speaker is saying. This lets the speaker know you are interpreting what they are saying correctly. This is accomplished by simply restating what the speaker has said, in your own words. It may go something like this, "It sounds like you're saying....or I think what I hear you saying is..Is that right?"

Finally gather all the insight you can from that person by asking open-ended questions. These are questions that require more than a yes or no answer. To do this you communicate a level of interest and a desire to really understand the speaker. The other significant challenge to this undertaking is that you do it without communicating any judgment or disagreement with the speaker. There are so many ways that this happens. It can be very subtle. Our tone, facial expressions, hesitation and so many other things can sabotage this process. Armed with this knowledge enter the listening experience with the objective of leaving your agenda behind for that moment. Remember, your goal is to offer the gift of listening with understanding. As soon as the conversation becomes an opportunity for you to judge, blame, teach, dissuade, or convince you have retracted the gift. It's challenging but with practice and training if necessary you can learn to be an effective listener.



Caring about the quality of your relationships.
Brenda Montani, MSC. RCC

TIP

Ask someone you care about today how they would rate your ability to listen. Without taking offense, let them tell you how you could be a better listener and what that would mean to them. Take the lesson to heart and make a concentrated effort to upgrade your listening skills knowing that it is a skill that requires learning and practice.

TIP

An inability to listen to a teenager by the parent is the biggest complaint I hear from teenagers. Next time you talk to your teenager be aware of what your real agenda is. The responsibility of parenting often is carried into every conversation we have with them. Go into the next conversation with the clear and simple goal of just understanding them.