



Communication



Exercise



20 min



Group



No

Listening Without Trying to Solve

As opposed to giving advice and problem-solving, listening is a valuable exercise for both client and clinician. According to Calhoun and Tedeschi[1], the clinician should adopt the general stance of “listening without trying to solve” to ensure that psychotherapy will actually help the client experience post-traumatic growth. However, many clinicians find it difficult to remain quiet and listen without problem-solving. Some clinicians, especially those early in their career, feel the need to provide a solution for the client or engage actively in some way that will be “useful” to the client. As Calhoun and Tedeschi[1] stated, “the temptation is to provide at least some expertise, give helpful advice or suggestions, or offer what amounts to a psychological equivalent of the written prescription the physician hands to the patient.” (p. 62).

This tendency to give advice and help solve problems is also common in personal relationships. When a friend or loved one shares a personal problem, we naturally try to jump in and help them find a solution. However, at that moment, our friend or loved one needs us to listen to him/her and give him/her the space to express how he/she feels, just like clients who have experienced trauma.

This “listening” approach to helping people deal with problems is central to Carl Rogers’ client-centered therapy. According to Rogers, “*We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet, [active] listening of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know*” [2, pp. 116]. Rogers suggested that listening to a person allows him/her to feel accepted and prized, enabling him/her to develop a more caring attitude towards him/herself and see him/herself as a “true, whole person” [2, 3]. In sum, “*when you are in psychological distress, and someone hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good!*” [2, pp. 12].

This tool is based on the concept of listening without problem-solving. It is a group exercise that invites participants to pair up and experience two scenarios: (1) sharing a problem while being listened to and (2) sharing a problem while offering advice and solutions. The idea is for participants to reflect on each experience to learn which listening approach is more beneficial.



Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole.



Goal

This tool aims to demonstrate the difference between listening to a personal problem with and without trying to solve it to learn which is the more beneficial approach.



Advice

- If a participant selects an unsuitable personal problem for the exercise (i.e., something related to family, money, or severe mental illness), take the individual aside and offer them some suggestions for appropriate services to address such issues, such as psychological therapy. Then, help the individual come up with a more suitable problem to use in this exercise.
- To enhance the likelihood that storytellers feel heard, listeners need to cultivate the ability to be fully present without problem-solving. This requires listeners to feel comfortable listening to their partners' problems. Advise listeners to be quietly sympathetic without disturbing the telling but with openness and compassion for any emotional response from the storyteller.
- Prepare for exercise by ensuring the correct number of instructions cards have been printed and cut out.



References

1. Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (1999). *Facilitating post-traumatic growth: A clinician's guide*. Erlbaum.
2. Rogers, C. R. (1995). *A way of being*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
3. Rogers, C. (1986). Carl Rogers on the development of the person-centered approach. *Person-Centered Review*, 1(3), 257-259.



Listening Without Trying to Solve

This exercise is about listening to problems without jumping in with advice or offering solutions. All too often, we leap in to try to solve people's problems. While problem-solving can be extremely helpful and beneficial, it is not what the other person needs. When others share their concerns, they simply want to express how they feel and need us to listen, not to help solve their issue.

In this exercise, you will pair up with another group member and see how listening *without* problem-solving and listening *with* problem-solving differs for both you as the listener and your partner as the person with the problem.

Step 1: Participants pair up

Ask the group to split into pairs, with one member being the storyteller and the other member being the listener.

Step 2: Participants think of a current personal problem

Ask all storytellers to bring to mind a current personal problem. Let them know that the problem they choose should be something with which they are struggling and something they are happy to share (that is, not overly serious). Examples of suitable personal problems include having a tough time with a new manager at work, friendship issues, and poor work/life balance. Examples of unsuitable personal problems include things related to family (e.g., child custody issues), money, and mental illness.

Step 3: Hand out instruction cards

Hand out the instruction cards to the listeners randomly, so that some listeners end up with the card with instructions for '**Listening without trying to solve the problem,**' and other Listeners end up with the card with instructions for '**Listening and trying to solve the problem.**' Ask listeners to read the card carefully and privately.

Step 4: Storytellers share their problem

Now ask the storytellers to tell their partner about their problem. The Listeners should listen and respond according to the instructions on their card. Allow 5 minutes for participants to complete this step. At the end of 5 minutes, ring a bell (or equivalent) to signal the end of the exercise and then bring participants back together as a large group.



Step 5: Illuminate problem-solving and non-problem-solving listeners

Ask the listeners to share their instructions with the storytellers.

Step 6: Evaluation

Ask participants to share their thoughts on the following:

- The storytellers: How was this experience for you? How do you feel now?
- The listeners: How was this experience for you? How do you feel now? What did you learn about your partner? How connected do you feel to your partner?



Instruction Cards

Listen without trying to solve the problem

Your task is to allow the other person to tell you about his or her problem without jumping in to try to solve it. Simply listen.

Helpful hints

- *Stay present and engaged in the conversation. Try to focus on the other person and the story. When your mind wanders, notice this and then return with full attention back to the story of the other person.*
 - *If your mind goes into problem-solving mode, come back to just listening.*
 - *Keep your lips closed and use body language such as nodding your head, maintaining eye contact, and leaning forward to show that you hear and understand what he or she is saying.*
 - *Notice the urge to jump in with advice and take a breath instead.*
 - *If what seems like a helpful solution comes to mind during the conversation, either store it in your memory for later or quickly write it down and then return to listening.*
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Listen and try to solve the problem

Your task is to hear about your partner's problem and try to help your partner solve it.

Helpful hints

- *Try to think of solutions while he or she is telling you about the problem.*
- *Share your solutions to the problem as they come to you; don't wait until the end of the conversation.*
- *Feel free to Google ideas as they come to you during the conversation.*
- *Do not worry about eye contact or other niceties - the purpose here is to get your solutions across and solve your partner's problem.*