

Listening partnerships

A workbook for the art of listening



You can only learn to listen by practicing. This chapter provides you the framework and the exercises, that you can use to practice and improve your listening skills. The exercises become more complicated, so I suggest that you begin with the basic listening section and progress from there. Even if you think you are a skilled listener, you may discover that listening for a long time without interrupting is a challenge.

Listening Partners:

The best way to learn how to truly listen is to find a listening partner, someone who also wishes to become a better listener.

You don't need to know each other well, if you do it may even make the practice more difficult, because you may believe that you know what the other person wants to say and thus not focus on what is actually being said.

If you choose to have someone you are intimate with as your listening partner, it is important that you make a commitment to stick to the rules about confidentiality and that you both try to have a "beginners mind" when listening to your partner.

There is one basic requirement with regards to choosing a partner. You must be able to trust your partner to not break the confidentiality agreement.

You will both need to make a commitment to take the time to learn this skill. As with any other skill, the more you practice the better you become. I recommend three sessions a month of 2-3 hours with one hour each for listening and an hour for talking about the experience.

A basic structure and a few guidelines will ensure that you get the most out of the time you spend. You don't need to be able to meet in person, as long as both of you have a place where you are alone, sessions can be done via phone or computer. If you are using a phone it is good idea to have a headset, both for comfort and voice-quality. Video is better than audio only because it can be hard to keep focused on a voice with no visual clues.

Some Basic Principles:

The number one priority for sharing is the need for safety;

Your surroundings need to be safe, so finding a place where you are alone and where there are no distractions is crucial.

Your time needs to be safe so plan how long you will use beforehand and make sure you are not interrupted.

You both need to feel safe and secure, so make sure to agree on the rules of confidentiality before beginning.

Confidentiality (not disclosing anything you hear to anyone) is the basis of true listening; only if you are certain that what you tell your partner will not leave the room are you able to truly share yourself.

This confidentiality is absolute, this means that you agree that what is being said in the sharing is not shared with anyone else not even if that other person is close to you and may promise to not share the information.

This practice is about supporting through listening, so you need to make an agreement about non-interference. In other words, the person listening will not try to help the other person with any issues unless asked to do so during or after the session.

This means that you agree not to talk with your listening partner about a personal issue that your listening partner has shared, outside the sharing unless your partner initiates a conversation around it.

This simple agreement can help ensure that sharing is done freely and without the need for concern afterwards.

Practicing basic listening skills

When you are the listener:

Listen is all you do

As simple as this sounds, it can be quite a challenge. Listening takes some practice, so in the beginning it is best not to make any exceptions to the rule. When you listen, you give the one talking all your attention, when you feel the urge to talk, no matter how good your intention, don't – just focus on what the other person is saying.

If the person talking displays their emotions, try to remain calm and simply allow it to happen.

Remember that releasing emotions is the way to relieve the pain. Only if the person talking asks for a hug or a tissue do you act.

Listening is not merely a mental process. Try to be at ease and act natural when you listen.

You may show your attention with your body language, however, make sure that this does not become merely another way of talking.

If the topic becomes too painful, you stop.

During your session, if you, the listener, feel that what you are hearing is too close your own pain, or that what you're hearing is too painful, it's important that you tell your partner and stop the listening. You must then decide how to continue. If possible, you can talk about how the person talking can find support for their subject outside your sessions, and as a listener, exploring your own feelings on the topic may be helpful.

As the one talking:

When you share, it's about you.

Use your time to talk about your own issues. talking about the person that is listening to you, knowing that they are not allowed to respond is cruel and talking about others is usually a waste of time.

You can talk about how you feel about your interaction with other people, as long as the focus is on you and your feelings and reactions.

The time is yours so use it.

Many of us are not used to having someone else's undivided attention for an extended period of time, you may feel uncomfortable about taking the space for yourself. This is your time and maybe you can use it to explore why you feel uncomfortable being the center of attention?

Silence is a wonderful way of listening to yourself.

If you don't know what to say, don't. You can be silent for as long as you want, you will not be interrupted. After being silent you will often find yourself saying things that you were not aware of feeling. If you don't know what to say, don't. So, relax and enjoy the silence and try to listen to your own true inner voice.

If it becomes painful, see if you can allow it.

Allowing and accepting the pain you feel, with all thoughts, feelings and emotions that it brings, is the only way to heal it. Sharing your pain with someone else is a powerful way of letting go of some of the tension. You are the one who decides what to talk about, so anytime it becomes too painful you just stop. You also know that the one listening will stop you if it becomes too painful for them. If you allow your tears to flow it will release the tension and soon you will feel the burden lighten and you will naturally go on to talk about something else. This is also the case with any other emotions such as frustration, anger, shame and guilt.

Basic Rules for Sharing:

- **Everything that happens in the sharing stays in the sharing.**
- The only person that is allowed to talk about what was said is the person that was sharing it.
- The other person is not allowed to comment or in any other way interact with what you have said, neither when you are talking or afterwards.
- You have to use all your time on yourself.
- The other person listens with interest, without interacting.

- You talk about yourself and from yourself.
- You do not include others in your talk.
- You can talk about how you experienced an incident with another person.
- You can ask for comments, suggestions or support during you sharing or afterwards.

Framework for a listening partner session:

- **You agree on when and where to meet and how long**
- You make sure that you have the time and space you need
- When you meet you agree on the format including rules, the type of exercise and the timeframe and time keeping.
- The first person shares and the other listens.
- When the time is up the person sharing spend a short time talking about the process and then the person listening can do the same.
- Then the second person shares and the first person listens.
- When the time is up you share how it was for you to be sharing and listening.
- Then you may talk about what you have learned from sharing and the process of listening.
- Find a way to end the session.
- Decide on the next step.

The basic listening and the following exercises you can repeat as many times as you want. My suggestion is that you do at least 5 sessions with basic listening before you move on to any interactive listening.

Once you feel that you are comfortable with the basic concept of just listening, you may want to try out different ways of listening. The rest of the exercises can be used to become better at the art of listening. I have tried to present them in a logical order, where the more complicated are presented last. However, feel free to pick and choose them as you see fit. One way could be to choose the exercise according to the subject that you want to explore. I suggest that both partners use the same exercise at least in the beginning of the partnership.

Some of these exercises are quite challenging, so you may choose to use 10-15 minutes each exploring this new way of listening and then spend the remainder of your time together doing basic listening.

What do we talk about?

You are free to talk about anything that is important for you when you are sharing. However, if the subject is too theoretical or intellectual there is often very little personal benefit neither for the listener nor the person talking. You are welcome to change your subject any time during your sharing, it is your time, however jumping from one subject to another may be a way of avoiding going deeper and can also be confusing for the person listening.

If you get inspired by what your listening partner has shared, then you can explore your personal view on the same subject. Even if you don't feel you have any pressing issues that you urgently need to discuss, the simple act of sharing what is on your mind is a wonderful way of clearing it.

Exercise 1

Basic listening

In this exercise, you meet with your listening partner and you each spend 30 minutes to an hour sharing whatever is important to you. Use the structure for the session outlined. When you share afterwards, make sure that you focus on the process rather than the content. In other words, talk about how it was for you to be listened to in this way and what happened to you as you were listening.

Exercise 2

Talking about a subject

The basic concept for this exercise is still practicing your listening skills, however now the challenge is to listen to someone who is talking about a subject that you are engaged in. Talking about the same subject for a longer period of time without being interrupted will allow you to expand your view and you will often hear yourself saying new things even about a well-known subject. Hearing your listening partner talk about the same subject may inspire you and help you develop your own views. 20 to 30 minutes each on subject such as “How I see my future” or “My relationship with my parents” can give you a new perspective on your own version of these topics. When you decide to do this exercise, you can either agree on the subject as you plan the session or decide the subject as you meet. You follow the structure of the basic listening exercise and if you have the time, you can either take two turns on the same subject or share two different subjects.

Exercise 3

Inquiry

Inquiry is a special form of listening practice used in the world of spiritual teaching. It allows us to access our unconscious mind and through listening to this part of us, discover new things about ourselves.

Here you explore questions such as “What is trust?”, “What is freedom?” and “What is love?” The most powerful questions are about essential inner qualities and the inquiry method helps us get closer

to them as we talk. You can also explore personal questions such as “What do I long for?” or simply “Who am I?”.

The exercise proceeds as follows:

- You decide on the question and how long you will talk each time (between 5 and 10 minutes).
- You sit face to face with your partner.
- You decide who talks (A) and who asks (B)
- For 5 minutes B asks the one question to A , giving A lots of time including silence to answer.
- Then A asks and B answers for 5 minutes
- You can then take a short break talking about the experience.
- For another 5 minutes B asks the same question to A.
- Then A asks B the same question for 5 minutes.
- Then you share the experience, how was it for you to do the exercise?
- You find a way to thank each other.

As the listener: When you ask the question, make sure that you use the same wording each time and even if the answers are very interesting keep to your task of listening.

As the one talking, take your time and allow yourself to be silent as that is when you will encounter new answers within yourself.

Becoming more advanced

When you have practiced deep listening for a while you will discover that you feel the need to interrupt the person talking less and less often. You will also notice that your own inner dialogue is quieter, when you know you can't interrupt there is no need to think about all the things you need to say, so you can give the other person even more of your attention.

At this stage you can begin to use some of the more advanced tools. The basic rules are the same and the purpose is to support the person talking in exploring even deeper.

If you find that using the new tools creates a dialogue rather than an active listening, you can always return to the basics: listen, listen and listen.

Exercise 4

Reflecting Back

This is a technique used by many therapists, because it is a very powerful way of relating to another person. When the person talking has told you an important part of their story, you tell them, in your own words, what you have just heard them say.

Before you begin with this exercise you can decide on the structure; should you do it at the end of the sharing or can you use it as a way of supporting the person talking during their time? How can the talker let you know how he or she wants or needs the reflection? How long and or detailed should the reflection be?

If the person talking does not feel that what he said is reflected in the way they meant it, they can of course talk about that. Try to avoid the temptation of starting a dialogue about what the person talking really said, remember the person talking owns their truth.

As the listener:

Be as brief and as clear as possible and remember that all you are doing is being a mirror to the other person. Try to avoid letting your own opinions influence how and when you reflect what was said. That will only confuse the person talking and according to the basic rules, you are not able to elaborate on your view anyway.

If you focus on the emotions, thoughts and feeling rather on the facts you will support the person talking in exploring the issue at a deeper level.

Try using the same words as the person talking as that will limit any need to correct your reflection.

As the person talking:

When you listen to the reflection, imagine that it is a mirror allowing you to hear what you are really saying. You can use it to dig even further into the issue at hand, reflecting on the reflection.

You can also use the reflection to help you become a witness to your own situation: if someone else had the experience that was just reflected back at you, how would you respond to that? Often, we are much more critical of ourselves than of others.

The important part of the reflection is that you feel understood, so even if there are parts of your story that the listener did not get completely right you need to decide how important that is to you: Do you want to spend your time correcting something that is not crucial to your own exploration? Remember your listening partner has full confidentiality so even if they did get a fact or two wrong no one else will hear their version of the story.

Exercise 5

Asking Questions

The aim of this exercise is to help the person sharing gain a great understanding of the topic being discussed. This is done through asking open, curious questions about the issue at hand.

You can imagine the listener functioning as a journalist or a detective, conducting an interview to try and understand the issue more deeply, but with all focus being on the person talking.

When you begin this practice you may want to structure aspects such as: how will the listener know if the way he is asking the questions is helpful? Should the questions come at a specific time (in the end, or when the person talking asks for them)? How detailed should the questions be? Asking questions that are helpful and inspiring is not easy. Even more difficult is asking the right questions at the right time. Thus, asking questions is a skill that, like listening, must be practiced.

The art of asking questions:

One of the most important aspects of good communication is to ask the right questions.

A good question depends on the situation, but there are a few guidelines:

A good question is:

Open ended: A question does not allow for a simple yes or no answer.

Respectful and compassionate: It makes the person feel safe and understood.

Short and to the point: The shorter and more direct the question, the easier it is to keep the focus on the person talking.

Non-judgmental: Questions that include the word “why” may be seen to implying guilt, whereas using “how come” will show your own curiosity.

As the listener:

Use your questions with care and compassion; make sure that you ask your questions in order to support the person talking and not just because you want to satisfy your own curiosity.

The more painful the subject is for the person talking, the more careful you need to be with your questions. When you are vulnerable it is so easy to misinterpret a question as an indirect critique and that may make you stop your exploration.

If in doubt, don't. In other words, only ask a question if you are sure that it is helpful for the person talking. By now you know the power of basic listening so even if you do not ask any questions at all, your presence and attention is a valuable gift.

As the person talking:

If you don't want to answer a specific question, don't. It is your time and if you want to explore something else you are free to do so. You may just state that you have heard the question but have decided to talk about something else so that the listener does not get distracted and may want to ask again.

When you are asked a question, try to be as open and curious. Rather than coming up with a well-known answer, try to pause and digest the question. You may surprise yourself with a fresh insight.

Exercise 6

Focusing on the Now

The only time that is real is the present moment. We forget this all the time and most of us spend our lives thinking about the past or the future. Being firmly anchored in the present makes you more alive and more aware. Conversations are more engaging, relevant and flowing when the focus is on the present moment. The present time is also the only time you can heal your pain and experience your joy. Although you may be shaped by past experiences, whatever pain or joy you feel is felt now in the present moment.

In this exercise the listener supports the person talking by asking the simple question: "what is happening now?" You may want to decide to do the exercise as an inquiry (Exercise 3) with the above question being the main focus, or you can simply use it as a way of drawing the person talking back into the present moment.

As the listener:

Use the question when you feel that the person talking has left the present moment and is focusing on the past or the future. Notice how you feel when that happens, what is the difference in your attention and focus when the person talking is in the present time and when they are not? When you do ask, make sure that you are doing it because the person is away from the present and that you are not using it as a way to avoid the painful explorations that the person is talking about as they are revealed here and now.

As the person talking:

The purpose of this exercise is to support you in talking about the present moment, so try and stay there if you can. Being present also includes being present in the negative thoughts, emotions and feelings. If you can accept and allow them you will find that they change and if you follow the change you will be surprised at “the diamond you will find hidden in the mud”.

When you are asked the question “what is happening now?” give yourself time to really feel into that, stay silent for a little while and notice everything that is going on in you before you speak. Try to keep the question in your mind so that your focus is on the present moment and trust that when you lose the focus and drift off, your listening partner will help you come back to present time.

Exercise 7**Whose turf are you on?**

It is a very basic truth that the only person you will ever be able to truly change is yourself. We have a tendency to blame others or the outside world for what is happening in our inner world. The only thing we can control is our own reactions and that is so hard that blaming others becomes the easier solution, even if it seldom solves the issue.

The aim of this exercise is to remind you when you are blaming others and trying to change the outside world, so that you can focus your attention on your own thoughts, emotions and feeling and take time to explore them.

The question for this exercise is: “who are you talking about now?” and the aim is to make you aware of the way your mind works. If you find that you spend most of your talking time on someone else's turf the exercise has worked and with practice you will find that you become better at staying in “your own part of the world” where the real change can happen.

As the listener:

Be gentle but firm, listen carefully and when the person talking leaves their own experience, ask the question in a gentle way. It may be that the person will acknowledge talking about someone else and continue doing so. If so, then you just repeat the question.

As the person talking:

This is an exercise and making mistakes is the most powerful way to learn, so relax and enjoy it; in other words, don't let the aim of staying on your own turf stop you from exploring your issues. See the question as a gentle reminder, not as a critical voice, after all you are not doing it on purpose. When you get the question, stop and retrace your steps. What made you go there? Becoming aware of the habits of the mind is more important than getting it right, so you may decide to answer the question by finding out why you felt the need to leave your own experience in the first place.

Exercise 8

Listening to your body

We all have the experience that our body talks to us, the knot in the stomach that signals fear, the butterflies in the stomach that tells you that love is in the air and so on. This happens on a continuous basis, however most of us have closed off our awareness of our bodies' signals. Our body always tells us the truth and ignoring the feelings in our body can be a way of coping in a difficult world. When you get in contact with your body you may also get in contact with a lot of tension, contraction and even pain. Resisting will only lead to more of the same, however if you can accept and allow it for a short while it will shift and change.

A dialogue with your body is an important step in finding your true self. Even if it may be difficult at first, keep trying and you will find that your body is your best friend rather than someone you have to ignore and keep at a distance. Like an honest friend, the truths it tells you may sometimes be hard and painful, but they are just that; true.

If you can't feel anything in your body this also has significance. Try staying with it and explore if there is one place in your body you can feel. If many things are happening at the same time, either find a way to include them all in one description or focus on one or a few a time. That can be the strongest feeling or the most interesting or the most surprising.

Many of us have a very limited vocabulary when talking about the feelings in our body. Experiment with focusing on a feeling and spend time finding the right words or try finding a metaphor that works. Visual metaphors are a great way to convey sensations. Like every new skill listening to your body takes practice and you may want to begin with a short and focused session before you include it as part of your longer listening sessions.

The way to remind the person sharing of the exercise is by asking the question: "what is happening in your body?".

As the listener:

Allow the person talking to explore the feeling in their body and the results of doing so, even if the feeling leads to an emotion or maybe a memory just let them go there. The time to ask the question is when the one sharing seems to have lost contact with the body and the feelings.

Many of us struggle when we try to express the feelings in our body to others. If you've ever sprained an ankle, you'll know how hard it is to express the feeling in words other than "painful". Give the person talking time and space as well as a lot of encouragement. You may not understand it with your mind, but try using your own body, can you feel what the person talking is describing?

As you listen, notice what happens in your own body. We can become so attuned to someone that if we pay attention, we discover that we mirror the other person on many levels. If at some point the person talking is in contact with a painful feeling and you begin to feel overwhelmed, ask yourself if you could be mirroring the person talking?

As the person talking:

It can be very difficult to describe the sensations in our body but do your best and remember that you are doing it for your own sake. It is important that you follow your own inner sensations, even if you feel that your partner will not understand what you are talking about, the act of trying to express it will help you to better understand what is happening within you.

When you connect with a sensation in your body, stay with it and get to know it. Take your time to explore it before you try to describe it.

If you can't find the words you are looking for, maybe you can find a metaphor that will help you explore the bodily sensation. You may also want to use your hands or your whole body to illustrate the tension that you are connected to. Your main challenge is to stay with the sensations in your body and not go up to your mind and try to analyze what is happening.

Notice how the sensations in the body change as you describe them and try to follow those movements as they may lead you even closer to yourself.

Exercise 9**Making space for everything**

Most of us only want to experience the good and positive sides of life. We try very hard to avoid pain, suffering and even negative thoughts. We seldom stop and consider what happens to all the experiences that we do not want? They don't simply vanish because you want them to, quite the opposite in fact; they are stored in you even if you are not conscious of it. They are the tension in your body, the emotions that are released when you didn't mean to and all the unwanted thoughts that pop up when you least expect it.

Like cleaning out an old suitcase, the only way to get rid of the excess luggage, is to take it all out and look at it. By doing this, you make space for and accept the experience. The thoughts, emotions and feelings connected to it will disappear.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Most of us have a lifetime's worth of unwanted baggage weighing us down, some it very heavy and painful. The inner journey is the quest to remove the excess luggage and find our true self, the gem at the bottom of the suitcase.

Every journey begins with the first step. In this case, the first step is to practice accepting and allowing

whatever may come and realizing that this is what is real and true in this moment.

The focus of this is what happens in the present moment. You will talk about something that happened in the past. However, what you are working with is not the story, it is your reactions to what happened as you experience them right now.

As an example, you may talk about how your brother teased you when you were young, then the focus is not how you reacted back then but how that makes you feel right now.

The question for this exercise is a bit more complicated. As the person talking relates an experience, the listener can ask "Can you allow this?" or "Can you accept this?". The person talking may then take time to feel the question, and if you can say yes then you can go on talking. If the answer is no, or you are not sure the listener can ask "Can you say yes to your no?" or "Can you say yes to your uncertainty?". While the second set of questions may seem odd, remember that the aim of the exercise is not to accept the experiences itself, but rather to stop and notice the thoughts, emotions and tension that are there in the moment. Once you are aware of their presence, you can then see if you are able to accept and allow them. If you can't, then this is your truth and that is what you stick with.

Be gentle, this is a powerful and difficult exercise.
Go slow and accept that "practice makes perfect".

If you accept and allow what is happening to you right now, you may establish contact with some painful parts of yourself. The key is to trust that what you fight will stay in you, but what you allow will leave. Try to follow the experience changing and see if you can accept and allow this too. Following the change from a painful memory full of denial and regret and into an accepted and understood experience, will show you that nothing in you is permanent and that accepting and allowing will change your perspective in ways that force and denial never could.

Being gentle includes looking at simple issues with relatively little tension surround them first. When you first learn to ride a bike, you don't immediately go down the main road during rush hour. Instead you practice on safe roads with your training-wheels and gradually build up confidence and skill. Eventually you will be able to navigate the main road safely.

The way you decide to structure this exercise will depend on what degree of focus you want. You can do this exercise as an inquiry with a very intense focus, or you can use it as your exercise of the day in your listening session. Either way, you will get to experiment and play with a very central aspect in your inner journey.

As the listener:

Use the questions with care and compassion, the person talking needs support in staying with the issue at hand. Making them feel pressured or criticized will make them retreat and become defensive.

To begin with, you may be confused by exactly what is meant by yes, no or maybe and you not get it right every time. Just accept this as part of the learning process and try again.

What you are looking for is the shift associated with truly allowing and accepting, whether it is the experience itself or the resistance to it.

When you feel this has happened, you let the person continue their exploration.

As the person talking:

Honesty is your main tool in this exercise. Unless you truly accept and allow your experience, don't say yes. The secret is that simply allowing and accepting your resistance to the issue will also promote a change in you.

One honest yes to a painful experience will not change it to a blissful and happy memory. The changes may be subtle, and it takes all your focus and attention to see them. Even if you feel nothing has happened, see if you can allow and accept this too.

This exercise is complicated, both because you are asked to do something you would normally try to avoid, and because of the yes, no and maybe aspect. So be gentle with yourself and with the listener, you may fall off your bike a few times even with the training wheels but keep trying and you'll find your balance. Just as cycling is a way to be free and see new things, acceptance is a tool that can provide you with a lot of freedom and joy.

Take your time. When you are asked the question, slow down and focus on all aspects of your experience. Being aware of your thoughts, feelings and emotions will tell you whether or not you can really say yes to accepting.

When there is a yes, stay with it and follow the changes within you without trying to alter the process. In other words, allow and accept what you feel in the moment.

Instead of having the listener ask you directly, you may instead try asking yourself the questions. This allows you to decide what you want to explore, and you can then choose to get the support from the listener during the yes, no, maybe part, as doing both by yourself can be a bit much.

DEEP LISTENING BACK UP

Deep listening is a powerful tool for handling painful situations and subjects.

In this chapter, we explore how listening and sharing can help you and others through difficult times.

Listening in a time of crisis

Any event or situation that drastically changes the way your private world functions, can be considered a crisis. One of the defining characteristics of a crisis, is a feeling of chaos and lack of control. You need to pick up the scattered fragments of your life and assemble them in a new way, that will allow you to move onwards.

A powerful way to find some structure in all the chaotic thoughts, is to talk to someone who will truly listen. When you are able to talk to someone about all your thoughts, including the frightening and painful ones, it becomes easier for you to see your way through the crisis.

As the one talking (the person in crisis):

You can begin with listing all the issues that are bothering you right now, let them all out, you may even want write them down. When they are all there out in the open, you decide which one you want to talk about. It may be the most urgent one or the most painful one or the one that is central to the crisis.

You will then talk about the chosen subject for as long as you feel the need to, and then if there is time you can choose another subject.

Often the crisis is big and ongoing so it will not be possible to solve all the issues at once, in this way you will at least have spent your time looking at one part of your life and maybe come up with a way to deal with that right now. Resolving a crisis is a long and difficult process, by tackling bits of it a time, it becomes more manageable and less intimidating.

As the one listening:

In the first part of the listening you can help your friend list all the issues, or you may be the one writing it down. Also keep the focus on the task: it is tempting for both of you to begin to explore one of the subjects before they are all listed but try to resist. When the person feels they have listed all the issues, you can ask: Is there anything more? That will often reveal some of the most important issues. Keep on asking for more until the one talking is sure that everything is on the table. It is the person talking that decides what to talk about. You may think you know what is most important, but you have to trust that the person talking is the one who knows best. It may also be that the talker needs to warm up with a less daunting area before looking at the really difficult stuff.

You will feel tempted to do more than “just listen”, and please don’t. After the agreed listening time you can ask the person talking if he or she wants to hear your thoughts and advice and often they will. Notice how what you say now is different from what you wanted to say in the middle of the story.

You are not there to solve the other person’s crisis; you are there to support the person in finding their own solutions to their crisis. Often, we feel helpless as a witness to another person’s pain, so if you are in doubt about your contribution, ask: Was my listening to you helpful? The answer may surprise you.

Other agreements you may want to make:

When you are in a crisis one of the most painful things is how alone and vulnerable you feel. If you as a listener feel up to the task make an agreement that the person in crisis can call you any time, day or night if they need to talk. You will also be honest about if you are able to talk right when they call or you will find another time as soon as possible. The important part is that the person experiencing the crisis knows that you are there for them.

You may decide to plan a new time for talking each time you meet or you will agree to meet only when the person in crisis feels they need it. The planning can be helpful for someone in a chaotic situation, to know that there is a safe haven planned can make it easier to cope with the time in between. During a crisis, so many new things can happen that it may also be good to know that you can talk when the need is there. If in doubt, do both.

All good relationships are about giving and taking and for most the giving is easier than the taking. When in the middle of a crisis you are seldom able to give and that might limit your ability to ask for support. As the listener you can make this easier by making an agreement with the person in crisis about how they can give you their time once the crisis

is over. This may be in the form of listening time or it can be by preparing a meal for you, paint you a picture or any other gift that comes from the heart. Because receiving is sometimes more difficult than giving make sure that you do both.

If the crisis is more than you can handle, get professional help:

This goes for both the person in crisis and the one listening. Professionals are trained and are not personally involved, so the basic rule of listening: “If it is too painful for you, stop” is even more important in a crisis. If you as a listener feel that this situation is more than you and/or the person in crisis can handle, find a professional who can.

In most countries, there is a crisis line that you can call 24 hours a day. The medical and social systems all have systems in place for supporting people in crisis. Many therapists can talk to people in crisis on a short notice.

As the listener the only thing you should not do is to give up and just let the person in crisis cope on their own, even if you know that they need professional help. They may be able to manage, but your consciousness will not let you forget it. As the person experiencing the crisis, it may be difficult to accept help from a professional. However at least give it a try as a way of respecting the listeners need to make sure that you are safe. You may end up agreeing with the professional that you don’t need their help, and then you all feel safer.

Deep listening is never not needed:

Even if the person in crisis is seeing a professional, the opportunity to talk about what is going on is always important. Any time someone listens to you is another step towards being able to cope with your new life. You may agree to leave the most painful aspects to the professionals but there is always more than enough to talk about anyway.

Listening and talking about painful experiences:

As the one talking:

Most of us have had one or more very painful experiences in our lives. Talking about the pain is a way of healing the wounds. If you focus on the past, talking about what happened then and how you felt then, bringing yourself back into the situation, you will not feel any relief and the risk is that you end up with even more tension. Instead try to focus on here and now and how what happened then is affecting you right now.

Any current thought, emotion and feeling that you feel in the present moment around the past experience are true and relevant, because you are experiencing them right now. If you express them (even the most shameful and violent parts) you will be able to see them for what they are, old painful memories that need to be released in order for you to function better in the present.

As the one listening:

When you listen, remember that what the person is talking about has already happened, and there is nothing anyone can do to change that. There is however a lot you can do right here and now to support the person in healing the pain of the past: You can listen with all your heart.

Most of us have had one or more very painful experiences in our lives. Talking about the pain is a way of healing the wounds. However, if you focus on the past, bringing yourself back into the situation, the risk is that the person ends up with even more tension.

If you sense that the person talking is “caught up in their past” gently guide him or her back to the present moment using terms like “what do you experience right now?” or “how is that affecting you now?”.

Shaking:

All traumatic experiences are stored in the body as tension, both physical and mental, and it is possible to release it naturally by shaking your body. There is a reflex in us all that allows us to release the tension stored in us during times of high stress, by allowing the body to shake. This is a signal that the danger is over and that it is safe to let your guard down. Most of us have learned to suppress this reflex and instead we store the tension in our bodies.

The process of natural shaking will bypass the mind and the brain where the memory is stored and allow you to release the physical tension and the emotions without having to relive the experience.

If you have had some very traumatic experiences, you will likely need to talk to a professional who is trained in supporting people with the kind of traumas you have.

Resolving severe traumas is beyond the scope of the processes described in this booklet. Treatment of extremely painful and traumatic experiences is best left to experienced professionals, but listening and sharing can provide a welcome relief and outlet for other aspects of your life.

Remember the more severe the trauma the more pain is stored in you and the longer and more painful it will be to release it. Being gentle with yourself and taking one step at a time, is the way to go. Attempting to force the process will only make things worse.

Listening to children:

The basic rule of listening also applies when you are communicating with children. You may have to help them express their feelings and thoughts as they speak and you may also need to give them support and help when they have finished talking, but the principle remains the same.

Be present and listen and let them talk even if you think you know everything; you may be in for a surprise.

Giving a child all your attention in the time it takes him to fully explain his situation, what they think, how they feel and maybe even what they would like to do about it is a precious gift. You are not only listening to the whole story, you also giving that child a powerful signal: You are basically indicating that the child is important to you and that you accept them as a person no matter what they have done.

Please make sure that you have heard the full story before you attempt to provide support, offer help or make any decisions about how to solve the issue.

If there is more than one child involved you can teach them all an important lesson by making them listen to each other without interrupting. Using a talking stick where only the person holding it is allowed to talk and everyone else has to listen can be a fun way to teach this important life skill, while promoting empathy and mutual respect.

Of course, when you listen to children you can only expect them to listen to your side of their story or issue. Their way of “giving back” will be by showing more genuine respect for you and isn’t that what we all want from our children?

Teaching children the benefits of listening to and respecting others is a valuable life skill that will serve them well throughout life.

Talking to teenagers:

If you are talking to teenagers, you can make an agreement about following basic rules of listening and also that you will both have the time to talk and the time to listen. When it is your turn to talk, remember the rule about not talking to the person that is only allowed to listen, so instead of telling your teenager what you think they should do, tell them how you think and feel about the subject you are discussing. When you both have had your say you will find it much easier to agree on a

solution that you can both live with. If need be, repeat the process again if the solution you offer is not acceptable to your teenager.

You may argue that it will take too much time to do this listening procedure every time you need to talk to your child. Then think about how much time you spend talking to your children without them listening (in other words telling them how you want things done without them doing it) or how much time you spend arguing with your teenager, with the only result being that you both are unhappy and frustrated.

In the beginning you may need to keep it very structured and according to the rules, but as it becomes more of a way of relating you can use it in your everyday communication.