

Excerpts from...
The LOST ART of LISTENING
By Michael Nichols

PART ONE:
The Yearning to be Understood

“Did you hear what I said?” Why Listening is SO Important

Nothing hurts more than the sense that people close to us are not really listening to what we have to say. We never outgrow the need to communicate what it feels like to live in our separate, private worlds of experience. That is why a sympathetic ear is such a powerful force in human relationships---and why the failure to be heard and understood is so painful.

Speaking without listening, hearing without understanding, is like snipping an electrical cord in two, then plugging it in anyway, hoping somehow that something will light up.

Listening is so basic that we take it for granted. Unfortunately, most of us think of ourselves as better listeners than we really are.

It is especially hurtful not to be listened to in those relationships you count on for understanding. The more important a relationship is to you, the more you want to be heard and understood...and the more it hurts when you don't feel that way.

To listen is to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved...appreciate.

A good listener is a witness, not a filter for your experience.

Reassuring someone isn't the same as listening.

How listening Shapes us and connects us to each other

What makes listening such a force in shaping character is the power of words to match and share experience—or contradict and falsify it. What is understood and accepted—“Yes, isn't that wonderful!” becomes part of your social self, the self you own and share. Some of what is not appreciated—“You shouldn't be feeling that way in the first place”—becomes part of your private self...or the “not me.” Some parents may be too anxious to tolerate a child's anger; others may be too embarrassed to tolerate their children's sexual feelings. Each of us grows up with some experiences of self so poisoned with anxiety that they aren't assimilated into the rest of our personality. LISTENING SHAPES US, LACK OF LISTENING TWISTS US.

What never gets heard affects more than a difference between the socially sharable and the private; it drives a split between the true self and the false self.

The seeds of listening are sown in childhood, in the quality of the relationship between parent and child. Parents who listen make their children feel worthwhile and appreciated. Being listened to helps build a strong, secure self, endowing the child with sufficient self-respect to develop his or her own unique talents and ideals and to approach relationships with confidence and tolerance.

It isn't exuberance or any other emotion that conveys loving appreciation; it's being noticed, understood, and taken seriously.

Being listened to spells the difference between feeling accepted and feeling isolated.

Attunement, a parent's ability to share the child's affective state, is a pervasive feature of parent child interactions with profound consequences. It's the forerunner to empathy and the essence of human understanding. Attunement begins with the intuitive parental response of sharing the baby's mood and showing it. The baby reaches out and excitedly grabs a toy. When the toy is in her grasp, she lets out an exuberant "aah!" and looks at her mother. Mother responds in kind, sharing the baby's exhilaration and showing it by smiling and nodding and saying, "yes!" The mother has understood and shared the child's mood. That is attunement.

When we see sadness or depression in someone, we tend to assume that something's wrong, that something has happened. Maybe that something is that nobody's listening.

The listened to child is a confident child. By the time a child is 4 or 5, empathy or its absence has molded their personalities in recognizable ways. The securely understood child grows up to expect others to be available and receptive. The listened to child who becomes ill or injured at school will confidently turn to teacher for support. In contrast, it's particularly at such times that insecure children fail to seek contact.

The need for listening is based partly on the need to sustain our sense of significance. The listener's understanding presence satisfies our need for appreciation and attention. But the idea that listening is something one person gives to the other is only partly true. Another vital aspect of listening is mutuality.

Listening bridges the space between us. Mutuality is a sense of not merely being understood and valued but of sharing—of being-with another person. Here it isn't just "I" but "we" that is important. Our experience is made fuller by sharing it with another person.

The way we become known is through empathetic responsiveness...called "mirroring." The good listener appreciates us as we are, accepting the feelings, and ideas that we express as they are. In the process, we feel understood, acknowledged and accepted.

Empathy—the human echo—is the indispensable stuff of emotional well-being. What is accurately mirrored becomes, in time, part of the true and lived self. The child who is heard and appreciated has a better chance to grow up whole. The adult who is heard and appreciated is more likely to continue to feel that way.

Not being listened to is hard on the heart; and so to varying degrees we cover up our need for understanding with mechanisms of defense.

Why Don't People Listen? How Communication breaks down

Most reasons communication breaks down focuses on the listener. Listening is a two-person process. When people don't listen to us, we can't help feeling it's their fault; they're selfish and inconsiderate. (When we don't listen it's because we are bored or tired or don't like being talked down to.) The truth is, listening is a complex process. Even though failures of listening all end in the same painful experience of not being heard, there are many reasons people don't listen.

When people don't say much, it's less likely that they have nothing on their minds than they don't trust the other person to be interested or tolerant enough to hear it.

Sometimes people don't hear us because they've had a bad day. They may be preoccupied with the angry things someone said or with all the extra work they have to do and thus not be able to listen to anything at all. Or they may be turned off to us by any number of things—they assume that we are talking to them only because we want something or that we're going to give them a lecture or that we don't really care about them. Listeners often don't hear because they have a preconceived notion of what we are going to say. Or they can't hear us because they can't suspend their own needs or because what we say makes them anxious. In short, although hurt feelings may tempt us to blame failures of listening on other people's recalcitrance, the reasons are many and complex.

When the communication breaks down, we—who are doing our best—tend to assume that the other person didn't say what he meant or didn't hear what we were saying. Usually, both parties to misunderstanding feel that way. But it may be helpful to realize that between speaker and listener are two filters of meaning.

The speaker has an intention of what he or she wants to communicate, sends a message, and that message has an impact on the listener. Good communication means having the impact you meant to have—that is intent equals impact. But every message must first pass through the filter of the speaker's clarity of expressions and second through, the listener's ability to hear what was said.

Some misunderstanding can be improved, like learning a skill. For example, by learning to give feedback, listeners tell speakers about the impact of their messages and give them a chance to clarify their intentions.

We often get out of a conversation exactly what we put into it.

The principal forces contributing to the listener's filter are the listener's own agenda, preconceived notions and expectations, and defensive emotional reactions. To listen well, it's necessary to let go of what's on your mind long enough to hear what's on the other person's. Feigned attentiveness doesn't work. **The expectations with which we approach each other are, as we shall see, just one of the many ways we create the listening we get.**

Dialog takes place between two people with not just ears and tongues but hearts and minds—and all the famous complications therein.

**An understanding attitude doesn't presume to know a person's thoughts and feelings.
Instead, it is an openness to listen and discover.**

Emotional Reactivity

We all have certain ways of reaction emotionally within in particular relationships. The closer the relationship, the more vulnerable we are to hearing something said as harmful, frightening, threatening, or infuriating even when it wasn't meant that way. Because of the dynamics of the relationship, our expectations of the other person, or what we've become accustomed to in previous relationships, we get defensive, which makes it impossible to listen to and to understand what the speaker meant to say.

It's not always the listener's defensiveness, of course, that gives rise to heated emotional reactions. Sometimes it's the speaker's provocation. "Why do I always have to ask you three times before you do anything?" when the speaker really means "Have you taken out the garbage yet?" will almost inevitably trigger a defensive reaction. If you don't watch how you say things as well as what you say, it's easy to provoke those you love. If it's a touchy subject you might have to watch not only what you say and how you say it, but also when, where and why.

This is not to imply that we need to spend our lives tiptoeing around each other. What it does mean is that all of us need to step back and calm down, being aware of what sets us off and what sets off those we want to communicate with, if we are to get through to each other.

Understanding the rules of the listening game: beyond linear thinking

We don't usually stop to examine patterns of misunderstanding in our lives because we are stuck in our own point of view. Misunderstanding hurts, and when we're hurt we tend to look outside ourselves for explanations. But the problem isn't just that when something goes wrong we look for someone to blame. The problem is linear thinking. We reduce human interactions to a matter of personalities. "He doesn't listen to me because he's too preoccupied with himself." "She's hard to listen to because she goes on and on about everything." Some people blame themselves saying "Maybe I'm not that interesting." Attributing other people's lack of understanding to character is armor for our ignorance and passivity. That some people repeat their annoying ways with most others they come in contact with doesn't prove that lack of responsiveness is fixed in character; it only proves that those individuals trigger many people to play out the reciprocal role in their dramas of two-part disharmony.

This fixed-character position assumes that it is extremely difficult for people to change. But you don't change relationships by changing other people. You change patterns of relating by changing yourself in relation to them. **Personality is dynamic, not fixed.** The dynamic personality position posits that it is possible for people to change; all we have to do is change our response to each other. We are not victims—we are participants, in a real way, and the consequences of our participation are profound.

What are you trying to say?

The message is the content of what a speaker says. But the message sent is not always the one intended. One of the unfortunate things we learn along with being "polite" and not being "selfish" is not to say directly what we want. Instead of saying "I want" we say "We should..." or "Do you want...?" When we are taking a trip in the car and we get hungry, we say "isn't it getting late?" instead of what we really mean.

Because this convention of indirectness is so universal, it doesn't usually cause problems. If the other person in the room says, "Are you cold?" you usually know he means "I'm cold. Can we turn up the heat?" But indirection can cause problems when stronger feelings are involved. Because indirection leads to so much misunderstanding and so many arguments, it does more harm than good. Two people can't have an honest disagreement about whether or not they want to move to another city as long as they engage in diversionary arguments about whether going or staying would be better for the children.

As speakers we want to be heard—but not merely to be heard; we want to be understood, heard for what we think we are saying, for what we know we meant. Similar impasses occur when we insist we said one thing and our listener heard another. Instead of saying "What I meant to say was..." we go on insisting what we did say.

Why don't you say what you mean?

Implicit messages tell us more than what is being said; they tell us how we're meant to receive what is being said. Depending on the situation, inflection and motives of the speaker, "let's have lunch" could mean "I'm hungry," "I'd like to see you again," or "Please leave now; I'm busy." The statements "I love you" and "I'm sorry" are of course notorious for having multiple meanings. Knowing the person makes it easier to decode implicit messages; suspecting his or her motives can make it harder.

In attempting to define the nature of our relationships, we qualify our messages by posture, facial expression, and tone of voice. For example, a rising inflection on the last two words turns "You did that on purpose" from an accusation to a question. The whole impact of a statement may change depending on which words are emphasized.

We know what we mean; problems arise when we expect others to.

The most important implicit message in what people say is the feeling behind the content. One of the most effective ways to improve understanding is to listen for both content and implicit feelings in what people say.

"Is this a good time?"

The context of communication is the setting; the time, the place, who else is present, and, because communication cannot be reduced to the obvious, people's expectations.

No matter how much people care about us, there are times when they don't have the energy and patience to listen. *Fishing for understanding at the wrong time is like trying to catch a trout in the noonday sun.*

When to talk: not when your partner needs some space or time to be alone. If we realize that good listening doesn't happen automatically, we'll learn to give a little thought to finding the right time to approach people.

Setting has an obvious physical effect on listening—in terms of privacy and noise level, for example—and an equally powerful effect in terms of conditioned cues. Familiar settings, like a therapist's office or a friend's kitchen, can be reassuring places in which to open up. Other familiar settings, like your own kitchen or bedroom, can be anything but conducive to conversation. *Memories of misunderstanding and distraction cling to some rooms like the smell of wet dog.*

There's a big difference between showing interest and really taking interest.

Why some people are SO hard to listen to

Even when you play by the rules, some people are hard to listen to...because their accounts run on to Homeric length, they're generous with details, and they talk incessantly about their preoccupations. Some people who talk too much are like that with everybody, but often, whether we appreciate it or not, some of them talk at such lengths with us because they talk so little with anyone else. Some people need our attention, but if the conversation is consistently one-sided, maybe part of the reason is we respond too passively.

Sometimes speakers are hard to listen to because they are unaware of what they've said—or its infuriating implications. When the listener reacts to what wasn't said, the speaker responds with righteous indignation, wounded by the listener's "overreaction." If a mother says to her teenage daughter, "Is that what you're wearing to school?" and the daughter bursts into tears and says "You're always criticizing me!" the mother might protest that the daughter is reacting unreasonably. Such questions are as simple as parents are free of judgementalness and children are free of sensitivity to it.

Some people are hard to listen to because they say so little, or at least little of a personal nature. If the urge to voice true feelings to sympathetic ears is such a driving desire, why are so many people numb and silent??? **Because life happens to them—slights, hurts, cruelty, mockery, and shame. These things are hard on the heart.**

We come to relationships wounded. Longing for attention, we don't always get it. Expecting to be taken seriously, we get argued with or ignored or treated as cute but inconsequential. Needing to share our feelings, we run into disapproval or mockery. Opening up and getting no response or, worse, humiliation, is like walking into a wall in the dark. If this happens enough, we shut down and erect our own walls.

Although a speaker's reticence may be seen as a fixed trait of personality, such traits are really nothing more than habits based on expectations formed from past relationships.

People who don't talk to us are people who don't expect us to listen.

We shape our relationships by our response.

Does the person who isn't very forthcoming with you have reason to believe that you're interested in what he thinks and feels? That you'll listen without interrupting? That you can tolerate disagreement? Anger? Openness is a product of interaction.

PART TWO THE REAL REASONS PEOPLE DON'T LISTEN

"When is it MY Turn?"

The heart of listening: The struggle to suspend our own needs

Taking an interest can easily be sentimentalized by equating it with sincerity or caring. Sincerity and caring are certainly fine characteristics, but listening isn't a matter of character, nor is it something that good people do automatically. **To take an interest in someone else, we must suspend the interests of the self.**

Listening is the art by which we use empathy to reach across the space between us. Passive attention doesn't work.

Not only is listening an active process; it often takes a deliberate effort to suspend our own needs and reactions—to listen well; you must hold back what you have to say and control the urge to argue.

The act of listening requires a submersion of the self and immersion in the other. This isn't always easy. We may be interested, but too concerned with controlling or instructing or reforming the other person to be truly open to his point of view. Parents often have trouble hearing their children as long as they can't suspend their urgent need to set them straight. And, as I'm afraid I've demonstrated, even therapists, presumably exemplars of understanding, are often too busy trying to change people to really listen to them.

Suspending the self does not of course mean losing the self—though that seems to be precisely what some people are afraid of. It's as though saying "I understand what you are trying to say" means "You're right and I'm wrong." Or that to give someone who is angry at you a fair hearing and then say "I see why you're upset with me" meant "I surrender."

Genuine listening means suspending memory, desire, and judgment—and, for a few moments at least, existing for the other person.

Suppressing your own urge to talk can be harder than it sounds. After all, you have things on your mind too. To listen well, you may have to restrain yourself from disagreeing or giving advice or talking about your own experience. Temporarily, at least, listening is one-sided. **You need to be silent. You need to be selfless.**

To listen well, we have to read the needs of the speaker and respond to the context. For example, when parents ask, "What did you do in school today?" the children often answer, "Nothing." What follows is frequently a battle of questions and monosyllabic answers. The parent wants to hear what happened in school, but doesn't listen to what the child is saying. The child is saying something like "nothing interesting enough for me to want to talk about it right now. I just want to be left alone." A child at school is exposed and vulnerable all day. Other kids look at you and pass judgment on what you're wearing, whom you're with, what you say, how your hair is fixed, and just about anything you might do that's visible. Teachers watch to see if you did your homework and if you're paying attention and to be certain you're not making noise in the halls or generally having any fun. After being the subject of such scrutiny all day, most children want nothing more than to be left alone. Their "nothing" isn't coy or withholding; it's self-protective.

The parent's side of this conversation isn't hard to understand either. They're curious about what goes on in their children's lives. They want to know if everything is OK. They want to know if their children are doing what they should be doing. They don't want to be shut out. Besides, sometimes kids say "nothing" but really do have something to say. Maybe you have to show them that you're really interested to convince them to open up. Asking about their day and really being prepared to listen shows interest. Honoring their right to respond the way they want shows respect as well as interest—interest in them and respect for their feelings. Children who sense that their parents are interested in hearing what they have to say—as opposed to anxiously interrogating or prying or living vicariously—will open up when they're ready.

“But I am listening”

“That reminds me of the time...” (Translation: “I can top that.”)

Interrupting someone to tell a similar story is a common example of how listeners don’t restrain themselves. The woman who has just had her car towed away doesn’t want to be interrupted to hear about the time that happened to you three years ago. She doesn’t want to hear your story until she’s had a chance to tell what happened to her and how she felt—and get some acknowledgement. She just needs a little time and attention.

“Oh, How Awful!” (Translation: “You poor, helpless thing. Here’s another fine mess you got yourself into.”)

Another example of listeners failing to restrain themselves is responding with excessive sympathy, a gift that usually means more to the giver than the receiver. Real listening requires attunement—reading and acknowledging the speaker’s experience, not the kind of cranked-up sentiment that may fool small children but usually comes across to adults as patronizing and false. Once again, the problem is failing to suspend the self.

When listening is genuine, the emphasis is on the speaker, not the listener.

Part of the problem is confusing empathy with sympathy. Sympathy is more limited and limiting; it means to feel the same as rather than be understanding. Nor does empathy mean, as many people seem to think, worrying about, praising, cheering up, effusive gushing, consoling, or even encouraging. It means understanding. **An empathetic response is restrained, largely silent; following, not leading; it encourages the speaker to go deeper into his or her experience.**

“Well if I were you...” (Translation: “Stop bothering me with your whining and do something about it.”)

Unasked-for-advice is annoying. It feels like being told what to do and being told that your feelings aren’t valid because we wouldn’t have to have them if we’d only do what the oh-so-helpful person we’re talking to suggests. (Responding with a similar story, as just discussed, can be equally unwelcome, especially if the person interrupts your story before you’ve finished or otherwise goes on without acknowledging what you’ve said.) When I’m telling someone about an experience or a problem and he or she responds with unwelcome advice, I say, “Thanks, but I don’t need any advice; I just need to be listened to.” (At least that is what I would like to say.)

Telling the person with a problem to “do something constructive” reflects a listener’s inability to tolerate his or her own anxiety. The difference between listening well and not is the difference between being receptive and responsive on the one hand and being reactive or introducing one’s own agenda on the other.

“Have you heard the one about...?” (Translation: “Never mind about what you were saying; your concerns are boring.”)

There are times when your fast-quipping friend is funny and you don’t mind his making a joke out of something. But there are other times when you are trying to talk and his wisecracking is annoying. What the jokester offers is the thin, unreliable rhetoric of distraction in place of authentic emotional engagement.

“Don’t feel that way.” (Translation: “Don’t upset me with your upset.”)

When someone is worried or upset enough to talk about it, listening to what the person’s saying and acknowledging those feelings is responsive to that person. Reassuring the person that there’s nothing to worry about is not responsive to him; it’s responsive to the listener’s own uneasiness.

Telling people not to feel the way they do is not listening to them. However, there are times when it feels OK to be reassured.

The line between wanting to be reassured and wanted to be heard may not always be easy to discern. The more the speaker expresses self-doubt or worry or concern in a questioning or tentative way, the more likely he is to want reassurance. The stronger the feelings, the more likely he is to appreciate being heard and acknowledged. When in doubt, listen.

When the people I know talk about feelings—what’s really on their minds, what they’re excited about, what’s troubling them—they want to be listened to and acknowledged, not interrupted with advice or told that someone else had a similar experience. They want listeners who will take the time to listen and acknowledge what they are saying, not immediately turn the focus on themselves.

“You hear only what you want to hear?” How hidden assumptions prejudice listening

How our attitude about the speaker biases what we hear.

One way to learn something about the forces that influence listening is to hear the same story from two different sides.

It is common for speakers to not be heard because their credibility is low. A father’s credibility, for example, may be determined by whether his wife and children think he’s tuned in to what’s going on in the family or too preoccupied with himself and his work to have any idea about what’s happening around the house. A father who is laid off and out of work may lose credibility. This may not be because his family is judgmental, but because people who have lost self respect in their own eyes often express themselves with a bitter or defensive edge that makes them hard to listen to. **Listening is always co-determined.**

The minute you pick up the phone and hear some people’s voices, you are wary. They are asking how things are going, but you are waiting for the pitch. When you answer the phone and they say hello, they can probably hear the enthusiasm drop out of your voice. Do they have any idea why? Do you dare tell them?

Credibility is also influenced by whether you are viewed as being in an appropriate position with a particular setting. A mother who talks to her adolescent children as though they were still little kids may be experienced as out of touch and therefore incapable of having legitimate concerns or feelings. A lot of grandparents don’t get heard when they give advice about bringing up baby. Their mistake is not necessarily being pushy or intrusive but rather being out of touch with their children’s anxious insecurity about being parents. The grandparents are not heard because their children perceive their advice as undermining their own shaky authority. In this case, the grandparents’ mistake may be treating their children as though they were more grown up, in charge and confident, than they feel.

How our expectations make us hypersensitive...

From the start, our lives revolve around relations with others. The residue of these relationships leaves internal images of self, other, and self-in-relation to others. As adults we react not only to the actual other, but also the internal other.

The past is alive in memory—and it runs our lives more than we know.

How we learn to overreact...

Some of the expectations we bring to our conversations are built up from the history of our relationships with those specific individuals. But some of what we expect to hear is part of the deep structure of our personalities, the residue of our earliest relationships. To understand listening and the dynamics of relationship it's necessary to consider not only what goes on between people but also what goes on inside them.

More than we like to realize, we continue to live in the shadow of the families we grew up in.

People act the way they do for a reason, and it tells you something about the way they were treated by their parents. One of the reasons we carry over sensitivities from home around with us rather than having resolved them is that most of us leave home somewhere in the transition from adolescent to mature adult responsiveness. In the busy time of our twenties, when we're making a start on life and work, we react to the expectation that we can't really talk to our parents by distancing ourselves from them. But then, often somewhere in our thirties, we decide to close the gap and rebuild our relationship with our parents, this time on a firmer, more mature footing.

People who decide to work on their relationship with their parents often go at it with certain unfortunate expectations. They imagine themselves settling old scores and righting ancient wrongs, like avenging angels, or suddenly waking sleeping intimacy, as though family ties, cherished, strained, or severed, could be refashioned overnight. The truth is, when you go home, you're more like one of nature's humbler creatures, and you have to keep your wits about you to avoid getting stuck on the family's emotional flypaper.

Most teenagers become so hypersensitive to their parents that they flare up at the least hint of indignity, like dry grass struck by lightning. (If you have a teenager in captivity, you'll know what I mean). If adolescence is a time for becoming your own person, late adolescence is a time from transforming your relationships with your parents from a childish basis to an adult one. Unfortunately, most of us leave home in the midst of that transformation. Distance and infrequent contact afford us the illusion that we are grown up, but for most of us who left home at eighteen or so, our relationships with our parents remain frozen in adolescent patterns.

Only one thing robs Superman of his mature powers: kryptonite, a piece of his home planet. A surprising number of adult men and women are similarly rendered helpless by even a brief visit with their parents. Superman becomes mortal in contact with kryptonite; mortals become teenagers in contact with their parents. We revert to childish roles when we get anxious because we never fully learn to resist parental provocation.

Our parents may be the most important unfinished business of our lives.

Our divided selves...

We don't easily face our own shortcomings, and it is particularly painful to confront our inability to listen. When we do, it's natural to become critical and get discouraged: "I'm a lousy listener," "I'm selfish," "I'm too controlling." Instead of thinking of ourselves in such global, negative terms, it's possible to realize that only a particular part of ourselves is having trouble listening. Using a little imagination to personify our parts as sub personalities may lead us to their source.

Take, for example, a husband who regularly finds himself shutting his ears when his wife tries to tell him that she needs more from him. With a little introspection, he might discover a part of himself that feels like a little boy who expects to be reprimanded by his mother. The little boy doesn't want to hear it; his mother's criticism makes him feel disapproved of and controlled; he wants to be left alone. The husband can calm down his "little boy part" by realizing—really getting it—that his wife is not his mother. She's not trying to control him. Even if she sounds really critical, what she is trying to express is her loneliness and her need for him. It's not we who are afraid to listen; it's those fearful parts of us that, once triggered, reduce us to childish insecurity and the anxiety that accompanies it.

Some of our sub personalities manifest themselves in warring inner voices that fuel those painful and tedious arguments we have with ourselves. The rival voices are normally apparent only when we are in conflict—facing a difficult decision or torn between two choices. The next time you find yourself caught up in an internal debate; consider the possibility that the thoughts and feelings on either side of the argument aren't just transient and situational. Maybe those competing voices have a lot to say. Maybe they have been saying similar things to you all your life, and maybe they've been fighting those same other voices they are fighting now. We usually only listen to one part, the one that represents the overdeveloped parts of our personalities.

What does this have to do with listening? Whenever someone asks your advice or shrinks from you or gets impatient with you, it's worthwhile to think about what parts of the person might be at war with each other. It may be useful to remember these conflicting voices when you're tempted to give obvious advice—telling people to stop drinking, start exercising more, do their homework, or quit smoking—rather than actually listening for what they really want from you. Can you tell these people anything they don't already know? If not, how about trying to appreciate where they're at instead of pushing them to where you think they ought to go?

Giving predictable advice to adolescents—urging them to stop doing things that aren't good for them—is a classic mistake made by adults. The voice of "no" is one that teenagers are well aware of. A more effective way to get through to them (or to anyone with self-destructive habits) is to adopt a more neutral attitude and simply ask them about the effects of whatever they're doing. Unfortunately, when this question comes from a person who is in fact anxious to make the child change, it won't be heard.

Teenagers can smell control a mile away.

Thinking in terms of sub personalities can be especially helpful in heated and reactive discussions. Instead of thinking of being at odds with someone, sometimes it's more useful to think of parts of one of you trying to change parts of the other. In a typical situation provoked by a teenager's coming home late, his father gets mad and demands to know what happened. His accusatory tone makes the boy feel judged and demeaned, and he counters angrily, which drives up the father's rage to the point that his wife tells him to calm down and stop shouting. This infuriates the father, and he leaves the house. If you were the father, you would probably think of the boy as disrespectful and the mother as interfering. If you were

the boy, you'd view the father as controlling. Instead, think of the conflict as being waged among parts of them. A rebellious part of the boy activates a controlling part of the father, which in turn mobilizes a protective part of the mother to shield the boy from the father's temper. If you were any one of these people and you began to think this way, how difficult would it be to control your part? How might the problem be affected if each of you could stay calm and avoid letting your reactive parts take over?

Finding the "parts" or obstacles or constraints that get in the way of our receptivity and then releasing these constraints is a very different way of thinking from accusing ourselves of being immature or selfish or inadequate. It isn't that we are bad listeners; it's our hidden emotional agenda that crowds out understanding and concern. When we clear away automatic emotional reactions—criticism, fear, hurt—we get to compassion, curiosity, and tenderness. Instead of condemning ourselves for being "bad" listeners, we can learn to identify and relax those parts of ourselves that interfere. In doing so, we release ourselves for effective listening.

*Why do you always overreact?
How emotionality makes us defensive*

One of the major reasons people don't listen is that they become emotionally reactive. Something in the speaker's message triggers hurt, anger, or fear, which activates defensiveness and blocks understanding. Emotional reactivity is like throwing a switch and having the electricity come on, only instead of music you get static. The static is anxiety.

What's really bothering you?

Perhaps the hardest messages for us to listen to without reacting emotionally are those that involve criticism. Most of us like to think that we can accept constructive criticism, and, on the other hand, most of us know people who can't.

When people overreact uncharacteristically, we usually assume that something's bothering them. If our relationship with them has a history of goodwill, we give them the benefit of the doubt and often try to find out what the real problem is. But what about those people who regularly respond inappropriately? Are they having a bad life? What makes people respond so inappropriately? Long memories. For a more subtle appreciation of a person's overreaction we need to know its trigger.

A listener's emotional reaction seems inappropriate only as long as you can't see his or her memory.

As a therapist, when I see someone responding "inappropriately" I ask myself what circumstances would make the response appropriate. What circumstances would make it reasonable for a woman to feel hopelessly worthless for having made a mistake? (Hint: most of us manage to survive our childhoods, but not all of us outgrow it.)

I once had a gray and white cat named Tina who was perfectly friendly, except that once in a while she'd lash out violently with her claws. These attacks were unexpected and unprovoked. One minute Tina would be purring to have her head stroked; the next thing you knew you'd have a bloody claw mark on the back of your hand. Eventually, we took her to the vet and found that she had wound in her

hip—possibly from a car accident when she was a kitten—so that what seemed to us like a harmless touch could actually be very painful.

Shame and insecurity are the wounds that make people react violently to criticism. Some people retreat from hurt feelings, while others attack. The most shame—sensitive individuals flare up at the slightest sign of criticism. Such people are hard to live with. But reacting to criticism with hurt and anger is something we all do. What varies is only the threshold of response.

We're especially sensitive to criticism from someone whose opinion we care about. The right person saying the wrong thing can puncture the ego like a pin bursting a balloon.

What make us intolerant?

We're likely to be as accepting of others as we are of ourselves. That's why those lucky enough to be raised with self-respect make better listeners. If we learn to respect and appreciate other people's feelings, we will learn to treat our own feelings more kindly in the process.

What we can't tolerate in others is what we can't tolerate in ourselves.

What turns conversations into arguments?

Reacting emotionally to what another person says is the number one reason conversations turn into arguments.

If you're not sure what emotional reactivity is, take inventory of your feelings the next time you rush out of the bathroom to catch the phone on the last ring—and it turns out to be somebody selling you something. That agitation, that anxious upset that makes you want to slam down the phone, is emotional reactivity. Is it wrong or unjustified? No, of course not. But it's that feeling, in relationships that do count, that makes it hard to listen, hard to think straight, and hard to say what you want to say.

Reactivity is like a child interrupting an adult conversation—it isn't bad; it's inopportune. Our intrusive emotions may need to be hushed, but they need to be listened to later. Why are we so reactive? What are the reactive parts of ourselves, and what are they reacting to? Our reactivity can lead us to parts of ourselves that we haven't yet befriended—mute and helpless parts, frightened and lonely parts.

The worst thing about reactivity is that it is contagious. When anxiety jumps the gap from speaker to listener, it escalates through a series of actions and reactions, which may eventually lead to an emotional cutoff. The cutoff may be simple—and simply frustrating—as one person walking out of the room or as sad as one person walking out of the other person's life.

The ability to listen rests on how successfully we resist the impulse to react emotionally to the position of the other.

When neither party to an exchange is willing to break the spiral of reactivity, both of them are likely to end up feeling angry and misunderstood.

We're most reactive to the things we *secretly* accuse ourselves of.

Some people have no idea how pressured and provoking their tone of voice is, but they come at you like a bad dentist.

The reason we don't recognize the impact of tone of voice is that we hear what we feel like, not what we sound like.

The first step to healing a ruptured relationship is to understand the other person's point of view. Try to figure out what that person might be feeling and then say it in a way that invites him to elaborate. Until you acknowledge the other person's position, he's unlikely to be open to yours. He may listen, but he won't hear.

Facing anxious encounters tests your maturity, strengthens you if you have the courage to stand fast and let matters unfold, or weakens you if you fall back into reactivity and defensiveness. ***Making contact, letting others be themselves while you continue to be yourself, and learning to resist automatic reactions strengthens you and transforms your relationships. Staying open and staying calm—that's the hardest part. You do the best you can.***

PART THREE **GETTING THROUGH TO EACH OTHER**

Most people won't really listen or pay attention to your point of view until they become convinced that you've heard and appreciated theirs.

Anytime you demonstrate a willingness to listen with a minimum of defensiveness, criticism, or impatience, you are giving the gift of understanding—and earning the right to have it reciprocated.

Listening well is often silent, but never passive.

Effective communication isn't achieved simply by taking turns talking; it requires a concerted effort at mutual understanding.

The simple failure to acknowledge what the other person says explains much of the friction in our lives. The more heated the exchange, the more important it is to acknowledge what the other person says.

You don't have to be responsible for someone's feelings to be aware of them—and to acknowledge them.

Listening is hard because it involves a loss of control—and if you are afraid of what you might hear; it feels unsafe to relinquish control.

He says, she says—but neither acknowledges what the other one says.

One way to get the listening you need is to tell people what you want.
For example:

"I'm upset and I need to talk to you. Just listen, ok?"

“I have a problem that I need to discuss, but I’m not ready to decide what to do, so it would be helpful if you could just listen to me.”

If you don’t want a reactive or intrusive response, anticipate your listener’s expectations.

“I’m not asking you to agree with me, but can you understand where I’m coming from?”

“I want to tell you something and I don’t want you to get mad at me. Just listen and think about what I’m saying, will you?”

Empathy begins with openness...

The essence of good listening is empathy, achieved by being receptive to what other people are trying to say and how they express themselves. Empathy takes an open mind to other sensibilities.

One of the most common expectations we bring to our conversational encounters, especially at home, is that we will be able to communicate just by doing what comes naturally. Unfortunately, the listening we do on automatic pilot is often perfunctory, precisely the kind of half-hearted or indifferent listening that makes our relationships less fulfilling than they could be, or should be. If you want to make any relationship more rewarding, practice responsive listening.

Responsive listening means hearing the other person out, then letting him know what you understand him to be saying. If you are right, the speaker will feel a grateful sense of being understood. If you didn’t quite get what he intended to say, your feedback allows him another chance to explain.

Responsive listening can be practiced like any other skill if you’re willing to put in the effort.

Empathy is achieved by suspending your own preoccupations and assumptions and placing yourself attentively at the service of the other person, being alert to what he’s saying and to the emotional subtext. *It means listening without being in a hurry to take over.*

Empathy requires two kinds of activity. The first is receptivity and openness, like a moviegoer who allows himself to be absorbed in and moved by the actors and their stories. The second is an oscillation between thinking and feeling. This requires a deliberate shift from feeling with a speaker to thinking about her. What is she saying? Meaning? Feeling?

Suppose your mate comes home and says he’s had a bad day and is upset. You know what he feels like. You’re sympathetic. So you ask what happened. He says he’s going to have to go out of town again next week. You know how he feels. All that travel. Maybe that’s how you’d feel. But empathy, real empathy, requires a second step: thinking about the other person. How does his “not looking forward” feel? Maybe he’s excited about being chosen to speak, but maybe that makes him anxious. Whether or not your partner gets to talk about these issues, to discover and share his feelings, depends on how empathetically you listen. If you want to know how someone feels, ask and then listen.

Do you rely on sympathy and presume you understand, or do you use empathy and work at it?

Most of our assumptions about why communication breaks down is about the other guy. We take our own input for granted.

You can get through to most people, even on difficult subjects, by first listening to their side of the issue and then, in a low-key but firm manner, insisting that they at least listen to your side of things.

Maybe you won't get through to the other person as long as you keep approaching them the same way you always do.

Expectations about how and when communication should take place work not when they're right or wrong, but when they're shared.

Saying "I really appreciate when you listen to my feelings; it means a lot to me" encourages other people to listen more.

How to diffuse emotional reactivity...

Defensiveness is a paradox of the human condition: our survival and security seem to depend on self-assertion and defense, *but intimacy and cooperation require that we risk being vulnerable.*

Empathy and tenderness are permission giving. Receptive, nondefensive listeners allow us to get our feelings out. They welcome unpopular parts of ourselves to speak...which allows us to do the same for ourselves.

Feelings are facts to the person experiencing them.

A full description of any listening problem always includes both parties. Ultimately, what defeats us isn't the provocative speaker but their own defensive response.

Really listening means taking interest, not showing it.

When feelings of not being understood come out as anger, hearing them, not shutting your ears or fighting back, is the key to calming down.

Don't tell angry people to calm down. Doing so only makes them feel like you are denying their right to be upset.

Sharing problems makes people feel better. Listening is how we help them soothe themselves and how we build closer relationships.

Once you accept that people who push your buttons are who they are, you can stop trying to change them—and stop overreacting when they do what they've always done.

Trying to avoid or control people doesn't resolve reactivity.

To cut down on reactivity, respect your own right to be yourself and other people's rights to be themselves.

The self-contained listener is not isolated or unfeeling, but non-reactive.

Although to some people it seems artificial, putting difficult messages in notes is an effective way to short-circuit reactivity.

PART FOUR

There are several excellent chapters on listening within specific contexts...between intimate partners, within the family and with teenagers, and in the work environment. If you would like to read more, please purchase the book. The book contains a good deal of information to illustrate the concepts above.

EPILOGUE

The epilogue is an excellent summary of the contents of the book.