

“After sixty years I learned how to listen, and it has changed my life. I realized during a listening exercise, as a listener I was often thinking about how I was going to help “fix” the situation which they were talking about. Or as I was listening, my mind would become preoccupied with trying to figure out when I could cut in and tell my story, which had often been triggered by what they were sharing. Letting go of my need to fix or share my story has made me a better listener and made my life simpler and happier. I am there to listen, not fix or share my stories. Try it!”

David Tillman

Storytelling in small groups or personal reflection. One by one, each person shares their answer to the first prompt below. Then go to the next question and so forth. A person can pass.

- 1) Share about how you were taught to listen as a child. How has the way you listen to others changed over the years?**
- 2) Share about what is going on in your mind as you listen to others?**
(As you are listening are you also thinking about what you are going to say to help fix the situation, making judgements, what suggestions do you want to offer, and/or want to correct them. Or does the story they are sharing trigger a memory of an experience you had that you often share the moment you can? Or do you choose to just listen, letting go of judgements, needing to fix, or share your story and acknowledging that you are listening by eye contact, a nod of the head, or another simple bodily/verbal expression?)
- 3) Try the listening exercise on page two.** (Note: become more aware of how you listen and begin to practice letting go of thoughts which distract you from actively listening. This is not easy, it takes practice.)

Check out and download more small group storytelling reflections and prompts at:
<https://lifesjourney.us/storytelling-in-small-groups-menu/>

This Listening Exercise Could Change Your Life ¹

Create small groups of three people in each group. Allow space between groups as best you can or use breakout rooms in virtual meetings (i.e., Zoom). (Note: with two people, one person will start as the storyteller and the other person as the listener.)

There are three Rounds – each person takes a turn being the **storyteller, listener, and observer**. The storyteller and listener face each other (if meeting in-person). The observer sits to one side (in-person). The Observer is also the timekeeper.

All three rounds should take thirty minutes or less. You may want to take a couple minute break between rounds to stretch, to absorb and reflect on your previous round.

For each Round:

Step 1: The Storyteller shares a personal story. (2 minutes - be concise)
(i.e., Who was there? - What happened? - When and where did this happen?
Why did you do this? - How did you feel about it at the time? -
How do you feel about it as you are sharing this story now?)

After Storyteller has shared their story:

Step 2: Listener recaps the details of the story they have heard and about the non-verbal body language they have seen. (1 minute – be concise)

Step 3: Observer shares their observations. (1 minute – be concise)
The Observer briefly shares about what was said by the storyteller and listener, what you noticed was not said, nonverbal body language you saw, and what feelings you felt were underneath the words (i.e., sadness, anger, joy, fear, etc.).

Step 4: Storyteller shares their experience. (1 minute – be concise)
How was this experience for you? What did you learn?

Go to the next Round. The Listener becomes the Storyteller, the Observer becomes the Listener, and the Storyteller becomes the Observer. Do this until everyone has been the Storyteller.

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¹ Listening Exercise (adapted), Grief and Loss class, Dr. Trina Armstrong, United Theological Seminary, New Brighton, MN, Fall 2013).

More thoughts about listening:

Begin to notice how you and others listen. As you listen, begin to make mental choices to let go of thoughts of wanting to fix, correct them, or share a similar story you experienced or know about. Do your best to let go of thoughts about things that happened earlier in the day or things you need to do, clear your mind/body. This is not easy and takes practice.

Think about a time where a trusted friend just listened to you. You knew they were listening to you with their body language. They did not interrupt you, try to fix what they perceived needing fixing in your life, did not share their stories, did not correct you, or offer advice. They just listened.

I think back at the times a trusted family or friend gave me the gift of being a compassionate listener. I felt safe to verbalize what was going on within me, often something I was trying to sort out. During those times, giving voice to what had previously only been in my thoughts opened new ways of exploring, organizing, sorting out, and continue healing whatever was troubling me. I began to trust my thoughts and words in new and healing ways. It was as if being in community with another person(s) and sharing part of my story and struggle created an opening for God (Spirit, Creator, or whatever word(s) you choose to use) to touch my soul (essence, being). I always felt loved, listened to, more insightful, and filled with hope for better days ahead.

As a chaplain, I have seen and learned the loving and healing presence that can take place by being a compassionate listener. Dr. Albers, my seminary professor, told us as care providers “to show up and shut up.” That has been great advice that I always think about before I meet with a patient, family, or staff. I have learned that creating a safe place for a person to talk is the greatest gift I can give them. I have learned to leave my need to “fix” or “share my story” at the door or on the floor next to my chair. This is not easy for me to do. Listening to what emotions are underneath their words gives me insights to what word or phrase I can say to acknowledge what I am hearing. I may say, “so difficult” (or: so amazing, so scary, so exciting, so frustrating, so joyful, so confusing, so sad) and then pause for however long it takes for them to continue sharing their words and feelings.

How we listen to God (Spirit, Creator), in nature, or to ourselves is worthwhile exploring.

I hope this has given you some insights into how you listen, how you perceive how others listen, and ways to practice becoming a more active and compassionate listener. Changing how we listen takes time and practice. Be patient and gentle with yourself. It is worth it!