

Listen Generously To Your Partner

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Effective communication has two aspects: expressing yourself clearly and listening effectively. Many of us do a variety of things instead of really listening to our partners. We get hearing and listening mixed up. We think listening is a natural process and doesn't need to be learned. In fact, hearing is a natural, physiological process of perceiving changes in atmospheric pressure. It is an automatic process that goes on even when we are sleeping. However, *listening* is something we need to learn and we need to practice.

We use the term “listening filters” when people are interpreting what someone else is saying instead of really hearing what they are saying. There are many listening filters: examples include wanting to fix a problem before you've really heard it, giving advice, judging or criticizing the other person, taking what the other person is saying personally, or jumping to conclusions. Notice what you do when you are not really listening.

The Experience of Others

As we coach our clients in listening generously to each other, they often have big realizations, or what we call *Ah-Ha* moments. One couple, whom we will call Beth and Lise, had frequent arguments about the choices Beth made. We coached Beth to listen generously to Lise instead of defending herself, as she usually did. After being heard, Lise realized that what she'd wanted was for Beth to think like her, feel like her, be like her and want the same things as she wanted. Being listened to generously in a non-judgmental way allowed her to move into a new understanding of what she herself had been doing. This breakthrough brought lightness to their discussions. Beth no longer needed to defend herself and Lise had some perspective on her own behavior.

Why Listen Generously?

When we use generous listening, we create more S P A C E around the issue than existed before. We open the opportunity to learn something new and to get inside the speaker or get to know her/him at a deeper level.

Listening generously is difficult, especially when one partner says something to trigger the other's defensiveness. When a partner expresses strong feelings, one often perceives the partner's feelings as an attack. This may trigger a “fight or flight” response, and a desire to defend oneself or attack back. This of course may lead to a defensive spiral with the partner responding similarly.

If you can truly receive your partner's feelings then you can hear them in a new way. This doesn't mean you can't have your own emotional reactions. It means that instead of jumping in and cutting your partner off in order to respond, you hear with an open heart

and contain your own emotions until your partner is finished. This requires a willingness to sit with your own feelings long enough for your partner to fully express all that he or she is feeling.

It helps to know that whatever negative feelings being expressed are only a small part of a much larger truth. Some of what is being expressed may be inaccurate or exaggerated. But pointing out the inaccuracies or exaggerations won't help you receive your partner's feelings.

How It Looks

We teach four levels of generous listening:

1. Listening for **Accuracy**: for the meaning in what the speaker is saying.
2. Listening for **Empathy**: for the speaker's feelings under their words. The listener strives to experience and see the world from the speaker's perspective.
3. Listening for **Mutual Creativity**: what they speaker really wants. Once the speaker experiences being heard, both the listener and the speaker can begin to invent a new way of relating to or viewing the situation.
4. **Validating**: what makes sense to the listener about what the speaker said.

One of our clients said to her partner: *I'm fed up with everything that we have to do this week. Why can't we ever get caught up? I never get any free time.*

In the past, her partner might have replied in any of the following ways: *Why don't you take some time out today?* or *So you don't want to spend time with me tonight?* or *We can't afford for you to take the day off work again.* or *How could you be tired? You slept in all morning.*

Instead, her partner was able to listen generously and say *I hear you saying that there's too much to do – I imagine you're feeling angry and it sounds like you really want time when there's nothing scheduled. It makes sense to me that you want some free time. Am I getting that right?*

Listening generously is a tool that will serve you well, and is especially needed when you make and enter into agreements, a topic we will look at more fully next time.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. To learn more, see www.marleneandbob.com or call 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary 1-hour introductory session.