

5

LISTENING

It takes two to speak truth—One to speak, and another to hear.

—Henry David Thoreau,
A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO LISTEN

It is a sacrifice to listen. It means being willing to give up something. In order to know other people better, to understand their meaning, their perception of the world, you are voluntarily refraining from inserting your own “material” into the process. All of your attention—one hundred percent—is devoted to understanding what the other person is saying. Good listening means refraining from roadblocks, from putting in your own material, at least for the time being.

Anyone who has a friend who is this kind of listener, who will sit with them and listen without judging, blaming, or giving advice, interpreting, approving, or disapproving—who just listens and understands—is very fortunate. The average person receives very little of this high-quality listening from other people, probably less than five or ten minutes a week. When you learn how to be a true listener and you do this for other people, you give them a very rare gift. You are communicating: “You are so important to me that I want to understand exactly what you mean, and I’ll keep my own material out of it for now so that it doesn’t get in the way.” Most people will like and respect you for caring enough to give them this gift. Good listening is caring.

It may sound like a good listener should sit in complete silence and say nothing at all. That’s good sometimes, but silence alone is not enough. Many people are disturbed by a listener’s silence and, as noted earlier, this can foster projection and

transference. The good listener is far from passive but is engaging in a special kind of involved concentration. Thomas Gordon has captured this essence in his term “*active listening*.”¹ The listener actively (and accurately) mirrors the client’s internal process—his or her thoughts and feelings, insights and conflicts.

A good mirror does not distort. It gives the person a true and clear picture of her or his present state. It neither flatters nor degrades, for judgment is not part of the mirroring process. Mirrors allow people to seek knowledge of themselves. They make it possible to see at least part of the image that is presented to others.

This is precisely what good listening does; and for this reason we prefer the term *reflective listening* because it reminds us of the purpose. The process of reflective listening gives back to the client (as much as possible) an undistorted and accurate image of his or her own internal process. In this way, reflective listening is deeper than the superficial imagery of a mirror. Without such mirrors, good reflective listeners, there is less opportunity for self knowledge. A poor listener, on the other hand, is like a funhouse mirror. The picture it reflects bears some resemblance to the original, but the mirror adds something and the resulting picture may not be very pleasant.

Reflective listening is the same process that Carl Rogers,² who first described it for the psychological world, termed “accurate empathy” or “understanding,” and it is the same skill that Thomas Gordon³ has labeled “active listening.” It is a universal skill for counselors, a basic process by which to deepen therapeutic relationships and facilitate change. Research has supported Rogers’ original hypothesis that counselors showing high levels of this process in their work tend to be more helpful to their clients.⁴

Before considering the elements of this skill, however, it is important to examine the basic attitude that underlies the reflective listening process.

THE ATTITUDE OF REFLECTIVE LISTENING

As emphasized in Chapter 4, people who use roadblocks when they listen to others are also communicating certain unspoken assumptions, most of which come back to the demand, “Listen to me!” In the same way there are several unspoken messages communicated when one engages in reflective listening. Although these may never be spoken directly, the very process of reflection communicates them to the other person. These messages include:

1. *You are important.* It is a privilege and a gift to be listened to. By taking the time to listen reflectively, the listener tells the other person that he or she matters, is important, is cared about.
2. *I respect you.* Reflective listening also communicates personal respect for the other person. Rather than imposing his or her own material, the listener chooses to pursue and trust the individual’s own process.

3. *I want to understand.* Although possibly not truly understanding how the other person feels or thinks or perceives at the moment, the reflective listener moves toward such understanding and at the same time communicates the desire to understand.
4. *You have within you the resources and wisdom to find your own solutions.* A reflective listening stance does not treat people as if they were sick, helpless, or dependent. Rather it communicates an assumption that people have within themselves the wisdom and power to find good solutions and healing. To Rogers, this is a built-in natural tendency for people to grow in a positive direction if distorting obstacles are removed.⁵ For the theologically-minded, it is a very short step from there to the belief that God is within each of us, that each has available that "still small voice" of guidance within, and that growth in the direction of God's will is as natural as breathing. The reflective listening process not only communicates belief in that inner wisdom, but also helps the person to get in touch with it. In a real sense the person's own inner beauty and wisdom are reflected back in a very helpful way.
5. *Keep talking.* A final, simple message that reflective listening communicates is that the listener wants the person to keep talking, to keep on sharing herself or himself. This helps the person to feel safe enough to open up. Roadblocks, on the other hand, tend to make the person feel more distant and to want to stop talking.

Acceptance

If all of these underlying messages were to be summed up in a single concept, it would be *acceptance*. Like faith, the concept of acceptance embraces both broad psychological and deep theological dimensions. Acceptance is the total attitude beneath the process of reflective listening, and it is central to the work of the counselor. But what is meant by this in practice? How can you help a person to feel accepted?

First consider what acceptance is *not*. Acceptance is not the same as approval. Being accepting of the person who is talking does not mean that you have to approve of everything that person says or does. You are not asked to approve of or agree with the person, only to accept him or her as a worthwhile human being. You show this acceptance by avoiding the roadblocks and by practicing reflective listening. To accept is *not*:

- to approve or disapprove
- to give advice or criticism
- to interpret or reassure
- to question or probe
- to be silent

Rather to accept is to give all your attention and energy to the process of understanding what the person means, and to reflect that meaning back to the person accurately. It is being open, allowing the other person to be as he or she really is, without using masks or filters. It is listening without judging.

The attitude of acceptance is one that pervades one's total being, of course, and not just the context of counseling. The more accepting you are of yourself, of your own feelings and thoughts, the more able you are to be accepting of other peo-

ple and to be open to what they have to say. We find that the reverse is also true—that the more you practice the attitude of acceptance toward others, the more you find an inner peace and a tolerance for your own imperfections. This is why we said earlier that the practice of reflective listening can leave you a different person. It is not a matter of waiting until you achieve perfect acceptance before you begin to counsel. Were that the case there would be no counselors, for we are all wounded healers. Instead the very process of reflective listening, through its powerful unspoken assumptions, creates in both listener and speaker a sense of deep acceptance. Rogers called it “unconditional positive regard,”⁶ and again it is a very short step to the kind of love that is attributed to God. Perhaps true acceptance, then, is something the counselor never fully achieves but always strives toward. Is it too bold to say that reflective listening, with its underlying attitude of acceptance, gives the person an echo of God’s love?

LEARNING TO THINK REFLECTIVELY

If our discussion stopped here, you would have perhaps a glimmer of how the process works but you would likely have little notion of how to go about it. Fortunately reflective listening is a very learnable skill, and it can be specified. Here again we draw on the original work of Carl Rogers and on the excellent translation of those concepts undertaken by Thomas Gordon.

A first step in learning reflective listening is to realize that any statement can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Because of personal experiences, you tend to interpret words in certain ways. The speaker may have an altogether different intention, and a second listener may come up with still another conclusion.

To think reflectively means considering different possible meanings, underlying intentions and feelings in what a person says. Figure 5-1, a diagram adapted from the writings of Thomas Gordon, illustrates this nicely. Whenever a person says something, it begins with an intention. This is within the speaker’s mind and is known only to him or her. It is what the speaker *means* to communicate. In order to do so, the speaker must *encode* this intention into words. This encoding process is subject to many kinds of distortions, for people do not always say exactly what they mean. It is limited by the strictures of our language and the speaker’s facility in using it. The message may further be distorted at the encoding stage by anxiety, inattention, and learned habits of (mis)communication. Through the encoding process, words are formed and the speaker speaks.

These words are *heard* more or less accurately by the listener. Here again distortion can occur through simple mishearing of the words. This may occur because the listener is less familiar with the language being used (for example, English is spoken and is a second language for the listener), but can also occur among the fluent. An example of this is the “whispering down the line” party game where one

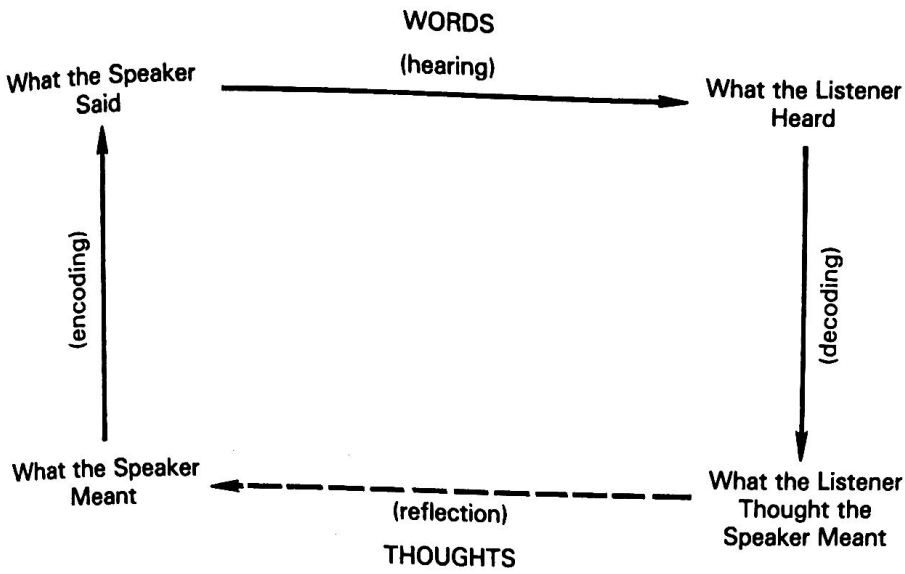


FIGURE 5-1 A Model of Communication. Adapted from Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*. (New York: Wyden, 1970).

person whispers a message to the next and so on through a chain of listeners. By the time the message has passed through several dozen people it may be unrecognizable just by virtue of this second stage: *hearing*. Or suppose a woman asks her husband, “Would you feed the cat?” She means this as a request: “Please feed the cat.” Not listening carefully or perhaps being two rooms away, the husband hears: “*Did* you feed the cat?” and answers, “No.” If this miscommunication is not cleared up, the woman may be surprised and resentful at his apparent refusal to honor this simple request.

Even if the listener receives the exact words spoken by the speaker, there is still a third very important source of distortion—the process of *decoding* or translating. Here the listener has the challenge of deciding just what the words *mean*. Note that this is an attempt to match the first step in this process, namely the speaker’s original intention. What the listener is responding to, however, is a thrice-distorted echo of that intention. Yet most people, reacting to this interpreted meaning, act as if this *were* the speaker’s intent, and they respond assuming that they *know* what was meant.

This process is not a conscious one for most people. Their interpretation of the speaker’s intent is silently equated with the speaker’s actual meaning. It is not surprising that miscommunication occurs.

Reflective *thinking* makes this process conscious, reminding you that your interpretation is only a guess, and may not match what was actually meant. It also makes conscious another process that usually proceeds without much awareness—the generating of possible alternative meanings and the decision as to which one is most likely to be correct.

In workshops we have people practice this reflective thinking step in the following manner, which we recommend that you try on your own. Find someone who

is willing to work with you on this by being a speaker. This person will say things to you that are somewhat complex in meaning, and your task will be to generate possible alternative interpretations. A good sentence stem that we often give to the speaker is, "One thing that I like about myself is that I . . ." The speaker can complete this sentence in various ways. The listener's response at this stage is to ask a very direct question: "Do you mean that . . . ?", filling in the blank with a possible interpretation, trying to find at least five alternative interpretations. The speaker simply answers "Yes" or "No" to questions. An example:

- SPEAKER: One thing that I like about myself is that I am open.
 LISTENER: Do you mean that you enjoy being around a lot of people?
 SPEAKER: No.
 LISTENER: Do you mean that you can talk about your feelings easily?
 SPEAKER: Yes.
 LISTENER: Do you mean that you are always looking for new things to try?
 SPEAKER: (after some thought) Yes.
 LISTENER: Do you mean that you are sexually liberated?
 SPEAKER: (smiles) No.
 LISTENER: Do you mean that you can listen to people without judging them?
 SPEAKER: Yes.

Here are five rather different possible meanings of what the speaker said. Notice several things about this process. First of all, there is more than one "Yes," more than one layer of meaning. Sometimes a "Do you mean that" question will raise a possible meaning that the speaker had not considered, and in this case there is the characteristic pause for thought before answering. Often the speaker will feel a strong need to say more than just "Yes" or "No"—to elaborate on meaning. Here you see the beginning of the power of this process to encourage the person to keep talking. Finally note that even here there is the possibility of misinterpretation. What you meant in asking whether the speaker was "sexually liberated" may not have been the meaning to which the speaker responded. Each person's mental dictionary is unique and how one person defines or interprets a word may be quite different from another's connotations for the same word.

This is a stage well worth practicing because it teaches you to *think* more reflectively—to stretch your thinking to find alternative meanings. This is the very thought process that underlies reflective listening. Good reflective listening, as we shall see, does not ask questions in this manner, but it *does* attempt to do what these "Do you mean" questions begin to accomplish—to close the cycle of communication shown in Figure 5-1 by checking your own interpretation with the speaker. Here it differs greatly from normal conversation. Instead of reacting to an interpreted meaning with your own material, you form an hypothesis about meaning and check it with the speaker. The result of this is that the speaker delves deeper into his or her meaning and talks more about it. It is the pursuit of this process (rather than the use of roadblocks) that creates the therapeutic relationship.

FORMING A REFLECTION

The ideal reflection is a *statement rather than a question*. It accomplishes the same purpose as the questions described earlier, but it takes the form of a statement rather than an inquiry. The reason for this is a subtle one. Reflections posed as questions are somewhat more threatening, more likely to throw the person off track. For example: “You’re feeling a little jealous?” may lead the person to deny the feeling, whereas the same words without the question feel safer, as if they were the person’s own words.

The difference in spoken English is one of inflection. A question turns up at the end, a statement turns down. Try it:

WRONG: You’re really angry at your parents? (voice turns up at the end)

RIGHT: You’re really angry at your parents. (voice turns down gently)

It is a subtle difference but an important one. When you ask your reflection as a question there is a slight communication that you think the person shouldn’t feel that way, even if that is not your intent. Making the same reflection as a statement communicates more acceptance and is less distracting to the speaker. You are not asking the person to reconsider, but merely helping the person to continue the train of thought without distraction.

A good reflective statement usually begins with the word “you.” It says something about what the speaker is thinking or feeling. There are exceptions. For example, “It seems like nothing is going right any more” might be a good reflection. In such cases the statement is still a “you” sentence, but the “you” is implicit: “It seems (to you) that nothing is going right (for you) any more.” Reflections beginning with the word “I” should be avoided; few good reflections start this way. The essence of a good reflective statement is that it makes a guess about the speaker’s meaning. Whether the guess is correct or not is irrelevant, because in either event the speaker will provide more information to improve your understanding.

Examples

As with the “Do you mean” questions, there is no single “right” reflection for any given situation. There are numerous possibilities. The following examples are possible reflections to the six statements of the self-assessment given at the beginning of Chapter 4. Remember that whether or not the reflection exactly matches the speaker’s meanings is irrelevant, and that there are numerous possibilities for each situation.

1. Last night Joe really got drunk and he came home late and we had a big fight. He yelled at me and I yelled back and then he hit me hard! He broke a window and the TV set, too! It was like he was crazy. I just don’t know what to do!

POSSIBLE REFLECTIONS:

You're really scared.

It feels like the end of the rope.

Things are getting worse, and you wonder what to do next.

2. My neighbor really makes me mad. He's always bothering us or borrowing things that he never returns. Sometimes he calls us late at night after we've gone to bed and I really feel like telling him to get lost.

POSSIBLE REFLECTIONS:

It's pretty annoying.

You're angry at him, and also you don't want to hurt him.

You feel caught between a rock and a hard place.

3. I'm really mixed up. A lot of my friends, they stay out real late and do things their parents don't know about. They always want me to come along and I don't want them to think I'm weird or something, but I don't know what would happen if I went along either.

POSSIBLE REFLECTIONS:

You want to please both your parents and your friends, and there you are stuck in the middle.

And in the midst of all this, you're also trying to figure out who *you* are and what you value.

It's pretty confusing.

4. My Maria is a good girl. She's never been in trouble, but I worry about her. Lately she wants to stay out later and later and sometimes I don't know where she is. She just had her ears pierced without asking me! And some of the friends she brings home—well, I've told her again and again to stay away from that kind. They're no good for her, but she won't listen.

POSSIBLE REFLECTIONS:

It feels like you're losing your daughter, and that's a sad feeling.

You're really afraid for her.

You're doing your best, but nothing seems to work any more.

Now it's your turn. For the last two *you* generate at least three possible reflective statements. Compare these statements to the ones that you wrote at the beginning of Chapter 4.

5. I really feel awful. Last night I got drunk and I don't even remember what I did. This morning I found out that the screen of the television is busted and I think I probably did it, but my wife isn't even talking to me. I don't think I'm an alcoholic, you know, 'cause I can go for weeks without drinking. But this has got to change.

POSSIBLE REFLECTIONS:

6. My life just doesn't seem worth living any more. I'm a lousy father. I can't get a job. Nothing good ever happens to me. Everything I try to do turns rotten. Sometimes I wonder whether it's worth it.

POSSIBLE REFLECTIONS:

GETTING STARTED

This process is more difficult than it looks at first, particularly in “real life” where you don’t have as much time to consider your response. In the beginning it may be helpful to have some stem phrases to get the words rolling in reflective form. One such stem, which we do *not* recommend that you use because it has been so overused, is, “What I hear you saying is that you” Here are some other possible stems to use as you practice:

It sounds like you

I imagine that you’re feeling (one that *does* start with “I”)

It seems like

You feel

So you think that

You mean that you

So you

You

Remember to make it a statement! Your voice tone should go down at the end of the sentence. Turning your voice up makes it a question. Another caution is that you should not get into the habit of relying on these stems. They are for practice, to help you get the words rolling. Stem statements can become very annoying if they are overused, especially if you tend to use the same one time after time.

DEPTH OF REFLECTION

One dimension of reflection that has been studied by followers of Carl Rogers is depth of reflection.⁸ Some reflective statements are fairly superficial. They do little more than repeat a part or all of the content that was spoken. Some people malign this level of reflection by calling it “parroting,” but even such superficial reflections have surprising power in helping people to keep exploring.

As the listener moves away from direct repetition, he or she begins to make a bit of a jump in guessing what was meant. One short jump is to rephrase slightly, to find synonyms from your own mental dictionary and to try them out. A little longer jump is to take the whole content of what was said and paraphrase it, adding meaning that you believe to be there although it has not actually been said. The deepest levels of reflection do just this; they add meaning and capture the underlying feeling instead of simply repeating what was said.

As an example, consider the last of the six self-assessment statements: “My life just doesn’t seem worth living any more. I’m a lousy father. I can’t get a job. Nothing good ever happens to me. Everything I try to do turns rotten. Sometimes I wonder whether it’s worth it.” Here are some reflections at each of three different levels.

SIMPLE REPETITION:

It seems like nothing good ever happens.
Sometimes you wonder if it's worth it.

PARTIAL REPHRASING:

Things just aren't going very well.
Nothing you do seems to work.

WHOLE PARAPHRASE, ADDING MEANING:

Things look pretty hopeless, and you can't see them ever getting any better.
Things look very bleak right now, maybe so bleak that you think about ending it all.

Counselors skilled in reflective listening use a mixture of these levels. The deepest reflections are most difficult but also can be most important. In essence they try to capture the underlying meaning of a whole communication, to include in this the person's feeling tone, and to add the next step, almost as if the listener were writing the next sentence of the paragraph.

One potential pitfall in paraphrasing is to leap too far. A guess that is too far afield can be very jarring. It becomes, in fact, a roadblock, namely an interpretation. The person suddenly feels analyzed, and in the process of wrestling with the interpretation may lose the original direction. A few examples of some jumps that would be too far from the statement above:

INTERPRETATIONS:

You're having a midlife crisis and don't know who you are.
Things aren't going well in your marriage.
And you wonder if God accepts you.

Clearly it's a continuous dimension, a matter of degree. To stay too close to the original (sometimes the better choice) may be to miss a hidden meaning, but to jump too far may disrupt the whole process.

Sounds complicated? Well, it is. The good news, however, is that as you practice this skill you can learn on your own how to do it better. You develop an intuitive sense of how far to jump. This happens because there is fairly immediate feedback about the usefulness of your reflection.

IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK

When you offer a reflective listening statement, immediate information is provided from the other person as to how it was received. You will know that you reflected well if:

the person keeps talking

the person acknowledges your reflection with some form of “yes” or “no” and goes on clarifying

the person shows a facial expression change that has been called a “recognition reflex”—a sign that the reflection touched on truth

the person tells you that you are a good listener, warm, understanding, etc.; you get an enthusiastic “Yes!” response

On the other hand you can tell when your reflection has missed the mark if:

the person stops talking or changes the subject

the person becomes defensive and denies a previous statement

the person shows nonverbal signs of defensiveness

there is a long pause after your reflection or a “well . . . ”

These are not 100 percent accurate signs. A person may, for example, stop and think quietly for a long time after an excellent reflection. On the whole, however, you can use these types of observation to get feedback about the appropriateness of your reflection.

Practice

At this point we recommend that you get some further practice, because the skills of reflective listening cannot be learned in any other way. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Work with a partner. Have that person use the same “One thing I like about myself is . . . ” statement or switch to “One thing about myself that I’d like to change is . . . ” This time you respond not with a question but with a reflection. The speaker, in turn, responds “Yes” or “No” but also continues to elaborate and explain further after each reflection. After such elaboration you offer a new reflection based on your new information. Example:

SPEAKER: One thing about myself I’d like to change is that I’m disorganized.

LISTENER: You can’t seem to get things done on time.

SPEAKER: No, not that so much as I can never find things.

LISTENER: And you think if you kept things in better order, it would be easier.

SPEAKER: Right. And more than that, I just feel like I can’t get my life together, you know?

LISTENER: There are all the pieces of your life lying around, and you wonder how they all fit.

SPEAKER: Yeah, or where it’s all going.

LISTENER: Where you are headed, what your purpose is. That must feel confusing.

SPEAKER: Exactly! I just feel so scattered . . .

This process could continue for quite some time. A relatively simple first statement was elaborated into a deeply personal issue. Notice, also, that the first reflection was “wrong” in that it got a “no” response, but that the impact of this reflection was nevertheless quite good. If the reflection is done well, it makes no difference if it’s “right” or “wrong.” For practice, read through this script aloud, turning each “LISTENER” reflection *down* at the end, then pursue this process with a partner.

2. This second exercise is more challenging. Again have a practice partner talk more at length about a current issue that is emotionally important in some way, or about a recent experience that included some significant feelings. As listener, respond *only* with reflective statements—no questions, no roadblocks. This is difficult, but it helps to break reliance on other kinds of responses and teaches the counselor that almost always it is possible to reflect instead. Try it!

3. A third type of exercise for learning reflections is to try it in “real life” conversations. As you become more adept with reflective listening, it is easier to make a larger percentage of your responses be reflective statements. Of course there will be some misses, as in any learning process, but usually people, as they try this new skill, are surprised at how well others respond.

With time the process of reflection becomes natural, so don’t be discouraged if it seems difficult or unnatural or “technique-ish” at first. Most valuable skills are difficult and don’t feel natural when you begin learning them. Walking, riding a bicycle, driving a car, eating with a fork—remember learning these basics? Or how about eating with chopsticks? All of these things seem strange when one begins. You feel clumsy and wonder if you’ll ever do it right, but with practice it becomes completely natural and finally you lose your awareness of the process itself.

Of course in ordinary conversations you will do more than reflect. Sometimes you will want to ask a question or shift the topic or give your own opinion. We have no magic guidelines to offer for how to mix reflection with other kinds of communication. We can tell you, though, that you will have to practice reflection very consciously if you are to learn it. The easiest thing to do is to fall back into your old habits. If you do take the time to learn reflective listening, you’ll be surprised at how *often* it can be used, and how much of a difference it can make in relations with others. One rule for the time being is this: Before asking a question or giving advice or using another of the roadblocks, consider whether you could instead use reflective listening.

SOME POINTS OF FINE TUNING

Once you have become comfortable with the basics of reflective listening, you can turn your attention to some of the more artful fine tuning points, to some refinements of skill that you can work on as you practice.

Overshooting vs. Undershooting

People are strange and sensitive creatures, and sometimes can be influenced by very small things. Whether a listener turns a reflection up or down at the end can make a difference in how willing the speaker will be to go on. In the same way a person is more likely to accept a feeling reflection and to continue to explore it if the listener understates than if it is overstated.

For an example, consider the emotion of anger. There are many words in the English language to describe angry feelings. Some of these are mild words, expressing a small degree of anger. Others portray moderate anger, and still others express a very strong degree of anger. Here are a few:

Mild ANGER words: annoyed, irritated, irked, miffed, disappointed

Moderate ANGER words: angry, upset, mad, resentful

Strong ANGER words: furious, enraged, outraged, irate

Besides choice of adjectives, there are other ways to make feeling words stronger or milder by modifying them. For example:

To make it milder: a little angry, sort of angry, somewhat angry

To make it stronger: really angry, very angry, quite angry

It makes a difference which word you choose to describe a feeling during reflective listening. In general, overshooting the feeling (overstating it, choosing a stronger expression) has the effect of making the person deny the feeling, or at least deny that it is so strong. This seems to interrupt the flow and may cause the person to back off or stop sharing at a feeling level. In general it seems better to make mistakes on the side of undershooting, by understating the intensity of the feeling. Judge how strong the feeling is, then understate it slightly. The result of this is usually for the person to say something like, “A *little* angry! You bet I’m angry, and more than a little.” The person then goes on to talk about the feeling.

When in doubt, undershoot.

Reflecting a Conflict

Another situation that calls for considerable skill from the reflective listener is when a person feels at least two different ways about something.

I want to get married again, but I’m afraid that it will end the same way that it did last time—in a painful divorce.

I’d like to move to Chicago where I could get a better job, but I hate a big city and I don’t want to lose my friends here.

I’m curious about the effects of marijuana and how I would feel if I smoked it, but I’m afraid I might lose control of myself.

I know I should stop drinking, but I enjoy getting drunk and besides all my friends drink.

Notice that in the middle of each of these statements is the word “but.” That is the telltale sign of this kind of situation. The person feels one way *but* also feels another. Two feelings or beliefs or values are in conflict with each other. The person is in conflict, one might say.

Conflicts are great occasions of temptation for the counselor, who may be just dying to give advice, to argue one side, to tell the person what should be done. Roadblocks are obvious and direct ways to do this: to give advice, be logical, moralize. But there is also a less obvious way that you may fall into without realizing it, even if you avoid giving direct advice.

This second way of taking sides is to reflect only *one* side of the conflict. If you think of a conflict as an argument within the person, you are then reflecting only one side of the argument. For example, if a person says “I think I’d like to have children, but I’m afraid of the responsibility,” you might reflect “You think it would be nice to have kids,” or you could choose to say “You wonder whether you’d like having somebody so dependent on you.” Both are reasonably good reflections, but there is a problem. Each represents only one side. It’s better to get *both* sides into the reflection: “You think it would be nice to have kids, and the idea scares you a little, too.” (also understated).

Why so much fuss over this? Because if you take sides by reflecting only one part of the argument, it is very likely that the person will begin to take up the other side. Suddenly the two of you are slugging it out. You have become involved in the person’s internal conflict by making it external. Consider also that the more a person argues one side of a conflict, the more he or she becomes committed to that side. (It’s a social psychological principle: I learn what I believe as I hear myself talk.) Thus you may unwittingly be backing the person into a corner without either of you realizing what is happening.⁹

If, on the other hand, you keep reflecting one side of the conflict, then the other, then back again, and so on, the person is likely to be left more confused. The best way to reflect a conflict is to get both sides at once. After all, the person does feel or believe *both* sides. Trust the individual to work it out, and help by being a clear mirror.

Consider the possible reflections for the drinker’s dilemma: “I really feel awful. Last night I got drunk and I don’t even remember what I did. This morning I found out that the screen of the television is busted and I think I probably did it, but my wife isn’t even talking to me. I don’t think I’m an alcoholic, you know, ’cause I can go for weeks without drinking. But this has got to change.”

ONE-SIDED REFLECTIONS:

You think you don’t really have a drinking problem.

You can see that your drinking is doing a lot of harm.

You’re really upset with what’s happening because of your drinking.

It’s scary when you can’t remember what happened.

BALANCED REFLECTIONS:

On the one hand you don't think you're an alcoholic, and yet you can see that alcohol is doing a lot of damage in your life. That must be confusing for you.

It sounds like you know you have to do something about your drinking, and yet you don't want to think of yourself as an alcoholic.

It doesn't seem that bad, and yet it does.

Using Analogies

What is an analogy? It is pointing out how one thing is like something else. Being frantically busy is "like running around like a chicken with its head cut off," or like "burning the candle at both ends." Ernie Ford used to talk about being "as nervous as a long-tailed tomcat in a room full of rocking chairs." A very shy person may be likened to a turtle or to an unopened flower.

Analogies can be fun. A lot of humor has to do with seeing the similarity between two things that you had not put together before. Analogies can also be very personal, very deep, showing that you really do understand how it is. The trick is to find the right analogy, and some of us are better at that than others.

To select the right analogy, you need to know something about the person, about how he or she thinks. What are the images that he or she would understand? To the person who thinks of chickens as coming in plastic wrap from the supermarket, the analogy "like a chicken with its head cut off" may lack meaning. People who have never used molasses probably won't know how fast it runs in January. To form a good reflective analogy you must understand two things: first, how the person really feels; second, what image would best capture that feeling for the person. For example:

A teenager from a farming family says, "I just don't know what to believe. When I'm with Joe I feel one way. When I'm home I think my parents are right. When my friends talk to me, I can see their points, too." What is that feeling *like*? Perhaps you as a listener would think of being pushed about in a city crowd, but that image might not work. Maybe it's like being blown around in the wind. What blows around in the wind? A kite? A feather? A tree? A leaf? All of those things might work. Or how about a weathervane? Most barns have weathervanes. So you say, "You feel a little like a weathervane. If the wind tugs you one way, it feels right to turn that way. But then the wind changes and you feel right turning there, too."

A good analogy often causes the person to "light up" in recognition, to feel very understood. A good analogy is hard to find. Poets work to find just the right analogy to express their subjects. So do good listeners. As another example:

Suppose a musician says, "I feel so terribly alone, like I'm in a big void. Inside I'm a very deep person, but when there's nobody to share it with it all seems so meaningless." If you know about music yourself, you will begin thinking about what kind of musical sound would be like that feeling, and perhaps you will say, "It's like the sound of a flute in a big, empty hall."

Of course you won't always be right. Sometimes your image will not be the one that fits what the listener meant, or will fall short of the mark. But that's all

right, because the person will probably say so and go right on telling you about how she or he really does feel. Good listening is one kind of target practice where there is no penalty for missing.

REFLECTIVE LISTENING WITHIN A COUNSELING SESSION: AN EXAMPLE

The following conversation between Janet and her pastor illustrates how reflective listening can be employed in a counseling session. Janet is fifty-eight years old and has spent most of her life married to George, taking care of their home while doing volunteer work in the community. Four months ago a blood vessel ruptured in George's brain, and one week later he was dead. Now the pastor receives a call from Janet, whose voice and tears on the telephone express the need for an immediate visit. The pastor invites her to come to the office later that afternoon:

VERBATIM

PASTOR: Hello, Janet, come in! I'm glad you came.

JANET: Hello, Pastor. It is nice of you to see me like this.

P: From our short talk on the phone it sounds like you are struggling with some feelings about losing George and being alone.

J: It's just that it's been such a huge change for me! And it all happened so quickly.

P: You didn't have much time to prepare yourself for it.

J: No. (She cries a little and the pastor waits silently.) At first people were so wonderful—bringing by food and calling and everything. There was so much love expressed by the people here.

P: And now that seems to be changing.

J: Well, I can understand. People have to get back to their own lives.

P: And still you feel alone—a little abandoned.

COMMENTARY

The pastor begins with a summary reflection of what Janet said in their telephone conversation.

Not knowing yet what Janet wants to say, the pastor stays close to her own words but offers a partial rephrasing.

The pastor reflects the initial, underlying feeling, and takes an interpretive leap, using the reflection technique of "continuing the paragraph."

Janet confirms the correctness of the pastor's paraphrase.

The pastor again reflects the underlying feeling, using "a little" to understate the feeling.

J: Yes, I guess I do. (She sits silently for half a minute.) Abandoned.

P: By people here and, maybe, by George, too.

J: I do! (Her facial expression changes markedly.) I get so angry at him! Is that normal? I don't think I ought to be angry. It's not his fault he had a stroke and died.

P: It doesn't seem right to you to be angry, and still that is how you feel. That must be confusing.

J: Well, that's just a little part of it. There are so many new things—so many feelings all mixed up.

P: You have to do a lot of things that George used to take care of.

J: Yes—the car, the house, the bills—he did so much. Yesterday I took a bottle of wine out of the cupboard and I realized that I've never learned how to use a corkscrew! Sometimes I don't think I can keep going.

P: It can be discouraging to have to face all of that alone.

J: It's not that so much. I just don't feel like I have the energy to do everything that has to be done.

P: Kind of tired, like it's hard to get up and face another day.

J: Right! Some mornings I don't think I can get out of bed. But I do, and once I get going I feel a little better. And then I get to thinking about something again . . . (she pauses)

P: (after a pause) and the feelings start: sometimes angry, sometimes sad . . .

J: Sometimes *relieved*, even.

P: Like it's for the better.

J: No, not quite. I wish George were here. . . . And yet some days it feels nice just to be on my own. I don't have to answer to anybody. I don't have to cook a meal unless I'm hungry. I don't have to make the bed.

Again the pastor makes an intuitive leap in this reflection.

The vehemence of Janet's response and the facial change suggest that the pastor has reflected well.

Resisting the temptation to advise or reassure this early, the pastor stays with reflective listening.

Janet opens up a new area.

The pastor reflects in paraphrase, making a guess about the new area. This is a reasonable reflection but moves away from the emotions that Janet came to explore.

Janet responds to the reflection by focusing on the tasks that face her . . . but then, as clients do, gives the pastor another chance.

This time the pastor picks up the feeling in the reflection.

"Discouraged" did not match Janet's own feeling, and she continues to clarify what she means.

After a "miss," the pastor stays closer to Janet's own words in rephrasing.

This time the reflection was "right on" from her perspective, and she continues to explain her feelings.

Again "continuing the paragraph" as a form of reflection.

Again Janet opens up a new area.

Not a bad reflection, but probably overshooting in intensity.

Janet backs off at first . . . but then resumes her original direction. If a trusting relationship has been established through reflection, it can override small interruptions due to misses or overshooting.

P: It's a new kind of freedom for you. Like a weight has been lifted from your shoulders.

J: That sounds terrible, doesn't it? I don't want you to think that George was a burden . . . I'm just so mixed up.

P: So many different feelings: angry, sad, relieved—sometimes all in the same day.

J: I'm up and down, up and down. It wears me out.

P: A little like riding on a roller-coaster, an emotional rollercoaster.

J: I never did like rollercoasters. Too fast.

P: And you wonder where this one is going.

J: I . . . (cries again)

P: It's something that's painful even to think about.

J: I'm scared! What am I going to do for the rest of my life? George was my life!

The pastor paraphrases and tries an analogy.

Janet reacts as if the analogy, too, were stated too strongly . . . but then returns to her feelings.

The pastor returns to reflection of emotion, and makes a good guess ("all in the same day") based on previous experiences with people in grief.

The pastor tries another analogy.

The pastor makes another intuitive leap in this paraphrase.

Uncertain as to the source of her tears, the pastor reflects the crying itself.

From this point the counseling session could go on in any of several directions. The pastor could continue with reflective listening, trusting in Janet's inner wisdom to find resolution. The pastor might now offer some statements of hope, regard, and support. They might pray together. In time the pastor might begin to help Janet identify her gifts and find new meaning and direction for her life.

This conversation exemplifies the therapeutic use of reflective listening. Every one of the pastor's responses in this dialogue was a reflective listening statement. This is not to say that a pastor should do *nothing* but reflect. Rather it is to show how it is possible to stay with a reflective posture even when there is great temptation to depart into other ways of responding, and how this can serve to help the client continue exploring his or her own meaning.

WHEN NOT TO USE REFLECTION

Reflective listening is a wonderfully valuable skill. It helps you to understand better than ever before, and it helps other people to grow and to discover new things about themselves. But reflection is not a solution to everything.

There are many times when you will need to do more than reflect. There are times for advice and direction, especially when people specifically ask for it. There are times for asking questions, namely when you need to know something. In helping people change, reflective listening often is just a first step, albeit a very good

one. It is the central skill for the first phase of counseling that we have called “clarification.” For the formulation phase, more direct questions may be needed, and still later it may be time for direction and suggestion. All of these later phases build on the relationship that is established through the reflective process, however, and you can continue to intermix reflective listening as you proceed through later steps of counseling.

There also are times when it is important for you to share things about yourself. One of these is when you have very strong feelings yourself. Chances are that the other person will pick up your feelings whether or not you express them directly. If you do not acknowledge your reactions directly, the person may misunderstand or misinterpret what is happening, perhaps taking it personally. To deny your own feelings in such a situation is to display the very kind of process that you hope to help your client overcome. Carl Rogers recognized this in pointing to “genuineness” as a third crucial condition for a therapeutic relationship, in addition to accurate empathy and unconditional positive regard.¹⁰

The sharing of your own internal process is an important part of building a relationship. For therapists this process of self-disclosure must be used judiciously, but it can contribute in important ways to trust. It is possible to hide behind reflection. Reflective listening works very well, and the other person may not be aware immediately that you are not revealing anything about you. If this complete imbalance continues, however, the relationship can begin to feel more unsafe. Part of the art of relationship building, either inside or outside of the counseling context, is to find that optimal balance between understanding and self-expression, between reflective listening and self-disclosure.

SUPPORTIVE COUNSELING

The term “supportive counseling” is sometimes used to refer to a type of counseling relationship where the goal is maintenance. There is no particular change or choice toward which the counselor and client are working, at least not immediately. Instead the goal is to help the client to hold on, to persevere, to gain self-esteem or spiritual centeredness. Supportive counseling is sometimes thought of as a second-class intervention, as if it were an antonym for “real” counseling. To the contrary, supportive counseling is a valid and valuable function, and one particularly appropriate within a pastoral relationship. The progress made may not be as dramatic as in change- or choice-oriented counseling, but this in no way diminishes the value of this kind of relationship to individuals.

When is supportive counseling appropriate? One good application is when the goals of counseling are unclear but the individual is clearly in distress. This represents a prolonged clarification phase of the counseling process, a longer than usual period of sorting-out and relationship building. Supportive counseling is appropriate when an individual has undergone a major transition (such as a divorce) and is working through the confusion that often ensues. This particular type of counseling is described in Chapter 9. Support is appropriate when an individual is facing an

apparently irreversible or unavoidable stress, such as terminal illness. It is appropriate for the lonely and isolated individual, particularly when coupled with other interventions that will eventuate in the development of a better support system for the person (see Chapter 20).

Reflective listening is the primary skill to be employed in supportive counseling. A counselor's initial "reflex" responses may be to provide reassurance, consolation, agreement, advice, or other responses from the list of roadblocks in Chapter 4. To be sure there is a time for such responses, and they are often appropriate to include within supportive counseling. Still we encourage you to consider whether reflective listening might be the better choice when you are about to use a roadblock response, and to experiment with what happens when you choose reflection instead.

SUMMARY

Reflective listening is a valuable and highly useful counseling skill. It is the primary vehicle for exploration during the clarification phase of counseling, and forms the core of relationship in supportive counseling. Based on an underlying attitude of acceptance not dissimilar from the love and grace of God, it helps to create an atmosphere in which transformation can occur. The basic purpose of a reflection is to check and clarify the speaker's intention behind a communication. Reflections are statements rather than questions, and attempt to capture the person's meaning. The counselor practicing reflective listening receives immediate feedback from the listener as an automatic part of the communication cycle, thus enabling the counselor to improve his or her listening skills. Analogies, undershooting, and reflection of conflict represent points of fine tuning, special skills to be developed. Reflection is not to be used to the exclusion of other counseling methods, but it can be applied far more often than most counselors realize. A balanced relationship includes self-disclosure as well as reflective listening.

From here, you must go on alone in the process of learning the skill of reflection. Yet you are far from alone, for each time you make the effort to listen reflectively, you learn. Every conversation in which you use reflection teaches you a little more about how to use it accurately and sensitively. It may not always be helpful or enough, but it will seldom be harmful. As the months and years go by, reflection becomes less something that you *do* as a *technique* and more a way of being, a way of relating to other people. For reflective listening changes you as well.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Books by Gilmore, Gordon, Egan, and Ivey described in Chapters 2 and 4 all contain good training material on listening skills. Some other resources on basic counseling and therapeutic skills are:

- HART, J. T., and T. M. TOMLINSON, eds., *New Directions in Client-Centered Therapy*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1970.
- KENNEDY, EUGENE, *Crisis Counseling: The Essential Guide for Nonprofessional Counselors*. New York: Continuum, 1981.
- KENNEDY, EUGENE, *On Becoming a Counselor: A Basic Guide for Nonprofessional Counselors*. New York: Continuum, 1977.
- LOUGHARY, JOHN W., and THERESA M. RIPLEY, *Helping Others Help Themselves: A Guide to Counseling Skills*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979.
- SINGER, ERWIN, *Key Concepts in Psychotherapy*. New York: Random House, 1965. Discusses common problems and concepts that apply to many varieties of psychotherapy—resistance, transference, countertransference, and so on.
- SULLIVAN, HARRY STACK, *The Psychiatric Interview*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. 1954.
This is a classic book on interviewing by the neoanalyst Sullivan.
- TRUAX, CHARLES B., and ROBERT R. CARKHUFF, *Toward Effective Counseling and Psychotherapy: Training and Practice*. New York: Aldine, 1967.
A standard textbook in nondirective, client-centered therapy, including specific training principles and methods based on the research of Carl Rogers and his students.
- ZARO, JOAN S., and others, *A Guide for Beginning Psychotherapists*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- ZUCKER, HERBERT, *Problems of Psychotherapy*. New York: The Free Press, 1967.
Like the Singer book above, discusses problems that are common to therapy regardless of orientation.

NOTES

¹Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*. (New York: Wyden, 1970).

²Carl R. Rogers, "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21, (1957), 95-103.

³Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*.

⁴For reviews of treatment process and outcome research on client-centered therapy, consult Allen E. Bergin and Sol L. Garfield, eds. *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change*. (New York: John Wiley, 1981).

James O. Prochaska, *Systems of Psychotherapy: A Transtheoretical Analysis*. (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey, 1979).

⁵Carl R. Rogers, "A Theory of Therapy, Personality and Interpersonal Relationships, as Developed in the Client-centered Framework," in Sigmund Koch, ed. *Psychology: A Study of a Science*, Vol. 3. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

⁶Carl R. Rogers and others, eds., *The Therapeutic Relationship and its Impact*. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).

⁷Paul Tillich, "You are Accepted," in *The Shaking of the Foundations*. (New York: Scribner's, 1948).

⁸Charles B. Truax and Robert R. Carkhuff, *Toward Effective Counseling and Psychotherapy*. (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1967).

⁹For discussion of therapeutic applications of this principle, see William R. Miller, "Motivational Interviewing with Problem Drinkers," *Behavioural Psychotherapy*, 11, (1983), 147-72.

¹⁰Carl R. Rogers, *On Encounter Groups*. (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1970).