

Listening with a Capital 'L'

Leisa Randall Principal Educational Psychologist

May 20 2020

This week is Mental Health Awareness week, and the Wednesday well-being chat today is about listening.

Listening is one of the most important ways to support your own and someone else's mental health.

Listening to others

Active listening sounds easier than it is. People who volunteer for listening services like Childline and the Samaritans undergo intensive training over a period of weeks and months before being qualified to listen to callers on the telephone, email, text or face to face.

Listening to someone else well, primarily means having to shut down your own needs, judgments, opinions and goals. It means finding a way to quieten yourself. It is essentially a selfless activity which focuses on the other person and not your own thoughts or desires to advise or direct another person. It can be very tempting to jump from listener into another role, such as 'instructor', particularly when we are listening to young people.

I find the words of the Persian poet Rumi's helpful when I try to be a good listener for my teenage sons. Rumi said

"Somewhere beyond right and wrong, there is a garden, I will meet you there".

These words help me to 'situate' myself away from my own opinions and judgments when listening to 15 and 16 year old young men. It frees me from a (very) strong desire to tell them both what they should do. Rumi's words encourage a listener to locate and travel to a space in which they can be non-judgmental.

Listening to someone who needs and wants to talk can be very hard. It requires patience, patient understanding and more patience. We have to pack our way our own notions of 'pace' in a conversation, and accept that the listening may come through connecting with the other person in silence, or through a shared activity.

Letting the person know you are there to listen, being physically and emotionally available gives strong signals to them that you are ready, patient and willing to listen when they are able to talk. Sometimes I notice that a reliance on use of electronic devices can get in the way of this 'display of availability'. It is unfortunate when that happens, because these moments for potential connection can be fleeting. If we are not ready, signalling that we are available to listen and do nothing else but listen, then the moment is lost. If you want to be able to listen well to others, you could try showing them that you are ready and available. You could think of yourself as 'a heart with ears'. You could think of yourself as a Listener with a capital 'L', as a reminder that listening is more than hearing someone speak.

Active Listening is;

- Non-judgmental
- Empathic
- Taking the time and adjusting pace of communication to match the speaker
- Validating emotions- allowing people to have their feelings regardless of what these are
- Summarising
- Checking back on understanding of the situation and the feelings that are generated
- Asking questions rather than providing 'solutions' or 'interventions'

Active Listening is not;

- About the listener rather than the speaker
- Giving advice
- Passing judgment
- Trying to fix difficult feelings/problems

This week a new **Listening Line** for children and young people in Midlothian has opened and will be run by staff in Children's Services and the Educational Psychology Service.

For details of this service please see the poster attached.

Listening to ourselves

That wise old poet Rumi also said

"The quieter you become, the more you can hear".

This is true for listening to the world around us, listening to others and listening to ourselves and our inner world.

When we think about listening we might imagine it is all about listening to someone or something else. There is however, a deep listening activity which we use to tune in to our own internal physical and emotional states. This relates to the 5th of the 5 Ways to Wellbeing (flier attached to today's bulletin) which is **Take Notice**. Often it is the people around us who notice we are stressed first, before we realise this ourselves. Often it is the people around us who hear the strain in our voices before we notice that ourselves.

If we take the time to listen to ourselves, we can develop self-awareness of our own feelings and vulnerability. We can then practise self-care, which will lead us to a place of greater resilience.

Self-care is the topic of the Coffee Break webinar with Sam Norton-Alexander from Mypas and Leisa Randall from the Educational Psychology Service this week on Friday 22nd May 11-12. (The flier for the webinar is attached to today's bulletin)

This 'relax-with-a -coffee' webinar will explore what self-care is and how to find ways to tune in to our thoughts, feelings, and the physical self in order to build resilience for cope when times are tough, and also when we are living our lives free from crisis.

Midlothian Education and Children's Services Listening Supports

For children and young people

Listening Line **0131 271 3834**

For parents and professionals

Educational Psychology Helpline **0131 270 5615**