

ACTIVE LISTENING – A MODEL OF EMPATHETIC COMMUNICATION IN THE HELPING PROFESSIONS

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SUMMARY

Background: Among the listening skills that scholars and practitioners alike consider valuable, active listening receives the most attention. It includes paraphrasing the message, asking questions, and maintaining non-verbal involvement in the conversation. The International Listening Association (ILA) defines active listening as “the process of receiving, constructing meaning, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.”

Aim: The paper aims to show the development of the concept of active listening as an empathetic model of communication that ensures understanding, acceptance, and involvement of individuals in communication processes and interactions.

Results: Active listening plays a key role in fostering meaningful connections and promoting positive interactions. With constant communication stimuli, digital distraction, and attention deficit, active listening stands out as a potential form of effective interpersonal communication. Active listening implies full involvement of the speaker, understanding the perspective, and empathic response. In interaction with young people, for example, active listening creates a safe and stimulating environment, encouraging them to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and needs. In this way, respect and a better understanding of experiences, perspectives, and emotions are shown, which builds trust, and self-esteem and ensures the development of a sense of self-worth and self-confidence.

Conclusion: Active listening is a crucial component of empathic communication in the helping professions. It enhances the quality of relationships between professionals and clients by facilitating a deeper understanding of clients’ needs, feelings, and perspectives. Active listening is a fundamental tool for professionals in the helping professions, serving as the foundation for empathic communication. Its practice can enhance clients’ quality of life, bolster their emotional well-being, and aid in problem-solving.

Key words: active listening, empathy, interaction, communication, relationship

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INTRODUCTION

In today’s society, communication is a key skill in almost every aspect, and it is especially important in the helping professions. Helping professions include various professions, such as social work, psychology, speech therapy, medical care, and others, which deal with providing support, help, and treatment to people facing various problems and challenges. One of the key elements of successful communication in the helping professions is active listening. Active listening is a model of communication that includes careful and conscious participation in the communication process, with an emphasis on understanding and empathy towards the interlocutor. It’s more than passively listening to the words that the other person conveys to us - it’s how we show that we’re interested in their situation, feelings, and needs. This paper aims to analyze the concept of active listening as a model of empathic communication in helping professions. Through theoretical frameworks and an overview of previous research, we will explore the importance

of active listening in different helping professions and how it can improve the quality of the relationship between professional and client.

LISTENING

The average person spends at least 50% of their waking time listening to others (Barker et al. 1981, Wagner 2001). If the other person’s communication is not managed effectively, about half of the time it will be miscommunicated. Verderber, KS, Verderber, RF, and Berryman-Fink (2007) point out that listening is an active process, which means that people have to try to listen well. When a person listens to others, he is often not only satisfied but also more easily achieves his goals, builds a positive relationship with the environment, and is respected and appreciated, which means that he becomes socially competent. Developed listening skills calm the interlocutor, make him trust the listener, and make it easier for him to express exactly what he thinks. The first step in listening is deciding to be

fully aware. Due to heterogeneous trends in mindfulness research, definitions vary. However, most definitions share two key elements: attention and acceptance (Bishop et al. 2004). Given these key elements, mindfulness means paying full attention to what is happening in the present moment, both internal (feelings and thoughts) and external stimuli, with an open and non-judgmental attitude. As with other types of listening, interpersonal listening involves cognition, e.g., paying attention to, understanding, receiving, and interpreting messages, sometimes, underlying motives and intentions (Burlison 2011, Jones 2011) and affect, i.e., how one feels about listening. The interpersonal context, perhaps more than any other, emphasizes the importance of listener behavior - “when people listen they not only process information cognitively, but also act towards others” (Bodie 2018). While in some forms of communication, such as conversation, one person (i.e. the speaker) talks to others who listen to the speaker during the entire communication process (with minimal response), in interpersonal contexts the participants constantly assume the role of speaker and listener while participating in the conversation (Bavelas et al. 2000). There are moments in a person’s interactions with others that encourage them to take on a particular listening role. These forms of listening are called “necessary” listening because there is usually a social and relational expectation or imperative for a person to engage in it once they realize that someone else needs to listen. One of the most common situations that require listening is when another person needs social support for a problem they have. When a person signals that they need help from another person, especially with something emotionally difficult for them, that other person can become a source of support. Although not everyone offers support when faced with someone in need, people give different reasons why they do not want such support (Ray et al. 2019). Yet people often act knowing that others are seeking (or needing) their help or comfort. In the end, most will act as support providers. A rarer form of needed listening occurs when someone we know dies. The role of the listener in closing conversations is perhaps more typical of the way we often imagine listening to work in the sense that “a quiet presence can prove more useful than well-intentioned advice” (Vora and Vora 2008). Halone and Pecchioni (2001) argue that listening can be considered perhaps one of, if not the most common, everyday relational activity, a set of processes involved in the development, maintenance, and decay of relationships. People tend to communicate, in part, based on the goals that the situation demands and, as such, use different ways of listening as the situation calls for (listening is a goal-directed behavior). According to Itzchakov, Kluger, and Castro (2017) and Trenholm and Jensen (2004), quality listening is empathic, non-judgmental, and respectful. More generally, Ridge (1993) describes good listening as “attentive”. People who are perceived as good interpersonal listeners are also perceived as more likable and attractive (Argyle & Cook 1976) and are perceived as more credible (Mechanic & Meyer 2000). Buber’s dialogic approach ad-

vocates a kind of presence towards other beings in which a person is receptive and receptive to their influence (Gordon 2011). Although Buber did not explicitly speak of listening, Gordon argued that listening is an implicit - and essential - part of Buber’s promotion of interpersonal dialogue, where true listening means being present to the other, i.e. responding to the other as a whole and creating space for the other to express his words and meaning. When you open yourself to the essence of another, you do not try to speak for him or impose your language, concepts, and models of interpretation on him. According to Buber, true listening means encouraging others to create their meanings, which may be very different from the meanings of others (Gordon 2011).

ACTIVE LISTENING

The term “active listening” was formally coined by Gordon (1975) as a description of a set of verbal and non-verbal skills essential for effective parent-child communication, although the roots of active listening can be found in earlier scientific works. Active or empathic listening (Stanley et al. 2000) can be traced back to Rogers (1951) as a cornerstone of his humanistic psychology (Orlov 1992). Active listening, as most generally defined, is an attempt to show unconditional acceptance and impartial consideration of the client’s experience. Active listening requires the listener to try to understand the speaker’s understanding of the experience without the listener’s interpretive structures intruding on his or her understanding of the other person. Since its introduction, active listening has become a ubiquitous part of communication training programs in a variety of fields within and outside therapeutic settings. In the field of communication, almost all interpersonal communication textbooks include the concept of active listening (Canary et al. 2003, Devito 2007, Adler et al. 2006, Trenholm and Jensen 2004, Verderber and Verderber 2004, Wood 1998). The authors list several fundamental elements of active listening. The first involves communicating non-verbal involvement/immediacy. Active (or empathic) listeners must communicate to the speaker that they are involved and give the person unconditional attention (Levitt 2001). Second, active listening involves paraphrasing the speaker’s message (both content and sentiment) by repeating, in the listener’s own words, what the listener thinks the speaker is trying to say (Trenholm and Jensen 2004). This must be done without making judgments about the speaker’s message. Finally, most active listening treatments suggest that the listener asks questions to encourage the speaker to elaborate on their beliefs or feelings (Devito 2007). Active listening as a communication skill is an integral part of life. Watzlawick et al. (1967) state that it is impossible not to communicate. Messages are always sent in human relationships, including through silence or deliberate absence. Furthermore, self-expression is always present in communication (Schulz von Thun 2001), which is most clearly expressed in oral communication. That is, apart from the content, the speaker always sends messages to the interlocutor about his

state of consciousness, feelings, and what he thinks about their relationship.

ing - short, occasional repetition of the other person's key points - is used to confirm understanding. Reflecting on



Figure 1. Active listening skills (Hoppe 2007)

That is why it is so important that at the other end of the communication channel, there is someone ready to make a mental effort to understand the other person. In general, listening skills are perceived on a sensory and cognitive level (Tyner 2009). The sensory level refers to the so-called passive listening, in which we listen to the interlocutor, but are not cognitively engaged or show understanding (Gordon 1996). Instead, through active listening, we consciously choose to engage cognitively. McNaughton et al. (2007) see active listening as a multi-step process aimed at better understanding the speaker's point of view. Active listening skills are an umbrella term for six communication skills that can be considered an effective model of empathic communication: attention, non-judgment, reflection, clarification, summarization, and contribution to a solution. First, we pay attention to the content expressed by the speaker, but, as Rosenberg (2007) adds, also to the feelings and needs associated with certain content. The primary goal of active listening is to set a comfortable tone and allow time and opportunity for the other person to think and speak. By paying attention to your behavior and the behavior of the other person, the conditions for a productive dialogue are created. Throughout this phase, one should keep in mind that the intention is to connect with the other person and understand them, not to interrogate them. It is necessary to act from a position of respect, allowing yourself to empathize with the other person. Furthermore, it is necessary to maintain pleasant eye contact and show interest. Close observation and effective listening require attention. It is necessary to pay attention to the non-verbal and verbal behavior of the other person to understand the important information he is offering. Another skill requires an open mind. As a listener, you must be open to new ideas, perspectives, and possibilities. Judgment is especially important when tensions are high. It is not necessary to immediately solve problems or give advice, the main task is to listen and pay attention. This does not necessarily mean that the person agrees with it, it shows that they are trying to understand. Through the third skill of reflection - like a mirror, information, and emotions are reflected without agreeing or disagreeing. Paraphras-

another person's information, perspective, and feelings is a way to demonstrate that you hear and understand the other person. It is not good to assume that it was well understood. The ability to reflect the content and feelings of another person creates a strong rapport and deepens relationships. Through the fourth skill, any problem that is ambiguous or unclear is checked again. Open and clarifying questions are essential tools within this skill. These kinds of questions attract people and encourage them to expand their ideas. They enable the detection of hidden problems. They also encourage people to think rather than justify or defend their point of view or try to guess the "right" answer. Open questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Clarifying questions help ensure understanding and clear up confusion. They define problems, reveal information gaps, and encourage accuracy and precision. Through the fifth skill, key topics raised by the other person are repeated as the conversation progresses. Summarizing helps people see their key themes and confirms and solidifies their understanding of their point of view. Summarizing doesn't necessarily mean you agree or disagree, it allows the loop to be closed. This can lead to additional questions as a transition to problem-solving. It also helps both parties to be clear about mutual responsibilities and next steps. Ultimately, being an active listener does not mean being a "sponge" - passively absorbing incoming information, but actively participating in the conversation, with thoughts and feelings. However, active listening is primarily about understanding the other person, and then about being understood. This is difficult for everyone to learn and apply. It can be especially difficult for people in leadership positions, who are led to believe that they need to be understood first so that others can follow them (Hoppe 2007). This model of empathic communication can in many ways be a useful and effective tool for professionals in the helping professions. Developing active listening skills is essential in many professions, including medicine (Bryant 2009), law (Tyner 2009), policing (McMains 2009), social work (Sanzarovets & Shatylo 2020, Seden 2005), helping professions (Bryan 2015), etc. Although this skill has become a

ubiquitous element in different contexts such as marriage counseling (Cole & Cole 1999), counseling in crises (Mishara & Daigle 1997), caregiver practice (Edwards et al. 2006), care for patients with Alzheimer's illness (Sifton 2002), education (Jalongo 1995), psychotherapy (Lester 2002) and sales skills (Comer & Drollinger 1999), has not received the attention it deserves in the social science literature.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

So far, two large empirical research groups are dealing with active listening. One of the contexts for the education of active listening refers to the education of counselors. Overall, research suggests that active listening is a skill that can be practiced and that practicing active listening skills increases overall listening skills. Thus, Paukert, Stagner, and Hope (2004) were able to improve the active listening skills of helpline volunteers and found that active listening training was still effective at least nine months after it was implemented. Levitt (2001) finds that active listening training improves the listening skills of counseling students. Miller, Hedrick, and Orlofsky (1991) also found that teaching crisis intervention counselors active listening improved their empathic listening. Professionals in related fields also seem to benefit from active listening training. Graybill (1986) found that an active listening training program for parents improved active listening skills. In addition, Cole and Rice (1996) report successfully training married couples in the use of a range of communication skills based on Guernsey's (1977) speaker-listener model (based on active listening) and that the couples retained these skills after one year. Garland (1981) also reports successful active listening training in married couples. The literature suggests that active listening is a skill that can be practiced by everyone. Another part of the empirical research deals with the effectiveness of active listening in creating positive outcomes for the listener, the speaker, and/or the relationship. Some research shows that active listening benefits the active listener. Undergraduate counseling students who have received specialized training in the micro-skills of active listening are considered more effective counselors and outperform their supervisors in various counseling skills (Levitt 2001). Preparatory students were also perceived as better listeners after active listening training (McNaughton et al. 2007). In addition, parents trained in active listening felt less anxious and had more confidence in their ability to solve problems with their children (Graybill 1986). Investigating coping strategies for crying children in a Scandinavian kindergarten, Lisper and Nilsson (1982) found that parental responses to active listening resulted in shorter crying times than the other two strategies tested. Furthermore, Davidson and Versluys (1999) found that brief training in active listening increased the use of active listening during conflict interactions, among many other skills, and that active listening during conflict increased the likelihood

of agreement between the parties. A Japanese study found that managers of employees with lower levels of job-related psychological stress reported using active listening more often (Mineyama et al. 2007). For example, research suggests that while a patient's initial level of anxiety is associated with active physician listening, active physician listening does not predict subsequent patient anxiety (Fassaert et al. 2007). Carl Rogers long ago argued that non-judgmental listening provides a safe space for the speaker by reducing the threat of evaluation. This threat reduction relaxes speakers and allows for non-defensive introspection (Rogers 1951, 1980). Recent work has provided support for Rogers' arguments. Specifically, Itzhakov et al. (2017) found that speakers who experienced high-quality listening were less socially anxious and defensive when disclosing their attitudes than speakers who experienced poorer listening quality. High-quality listening also increased speakers' openness to change to a greater extent when they shared prejudices with high-quality listeners compared to speakers who shared their prejudiced views with moderate-quality listeners (Itzhakov et al. 2020). Gearhart and Bodie (2011) found that higher scores on the Active Empathic Listening Scale were positively related to Riggio's (2005) measures of social sensitivity, social expressiveness, emotional sensitivity, and social control, all of which were associated with a variety of positive interaction and relationship outcomes. In addition, ratings of target others on the active empathic listening scale are positively related to target groups' communication skills and discriminate between people who are considered to be "good" and "bad" listeners (Bodie 2011). Furthermore, Drollinger et al. (2006) reported that salespeople's engagement in active listening responses was positively related to customer ratings of sales professionals' listening skills. An organizational study in Japan shows that employees with lower levels of psychological stress at work have supervisors who self-report that they regularly use active listening in discussions with employees (Mineyama et al. 2007). Reznik, Roloff, and Miller's (2012) research on romantic couple arguments reported that active listening was positively related to problem-solving, relationship stability, and perceived problem solvability, and negatively related to intrusive thoughts during arguments. Active listening training increases students' confidence in their listening skills (McNaughton et al. 2007). Federal law enforcement crisis negotiators scored higher on communication skills during mock hostage negotiation exercises after receiving active listening training than before training (Van Hasselt et al. 2006). Similarly, supervisors rated student helpline volunteers as more skilled six weeks after active listening training (Paukert et al. 2004). Likewise, mental health counseling students scored higher in counseling effectiveness after learning active listening (Levitt 2001). Miller, Hendrick, and Orlofsky (1991) also successfully improved the empathic listening skills of crisis intervention counselors by training them to provide active listening responses. Finally,

D'Augelli and Levy (1978) reported that crisis volunteers who responded with advice and problem-solving generated shorter, less effective conversations than when they used empathic (active listening) responses. Overall, these studies suggest that active listening training improves trainees' perceptions of their listening skills.

CONCLUSION

Active listening represents an essential model of empathic communication in the helping professions, with the potential to improve the quality of relationships between professionals and clients. Through careful and conscious participation in the communication process, active listening enables professionals to better understand their client's needs, feelings, and perspectives, which can provide the basis for effective support and assistance. Active listening, furthermore, is a key tool available to professionals in the helping professions and forms the basis of empathic communication. Its application can improve the quality of life of clients, contributing to their emotional well-being and problem-solving. It is therefore crucial that professionals in the helping professions consciously develop and nurture their active listening skills to provide the best possible support and assistance to those who need it most. As we saw in a brief overview of research related to the analysis of the effects of active listening in different contexts: from crisis interventions to marital and parental communication to counselors. Active listening is the basis of the empathic model of communication, and in person-oriented communication, it is a skill that, as we could see in the aforementioned research, proved to be crucial. The elements of active listening are practical patterns by which we improve our communication competence and enable the development of a model of empathic communication.

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