

Presence, Listening Well, and Effective Conversation

Stephen R. Andrew LCSW, LADC, CCS, CGP

We desire in our core to be heard and to be believed. Regardless of our race, culture, gender, age, or profession, we all seek to be deeply understood from our own unique view of the world. When we share our thoughts and feelings, we don't want opinion, advice, reason, or judgment; we do not want to be ignored or taken lightly. We share our thoughts and feelings because we are looking for connection. Usually, people listen to us intellectually or with simple reflection and this leaves us feeling unsatisfied with how we have been heard. What we crave is to be deeply understood by someone coming from the heart with warmth and kindness.

Listening well is an engagement skill, to be actively listening and responding. If we have difficulties listening well, we will probably have trouble responding well and have difficulty sharing our feelings and thoughts. This is especially true when conversations with our peers, friends, or loved ones bring up strong and difficult emotions or thoughts. These thoughts are attached to strong emotions and to self-protective behavior patterns of reaction that protect us from historical shame. We get scared when we are not sure what to skillfully say or do. The moment that we are triggered, we mistakenly think that we are less worthy and less mature because we have such intense thoughts and feelings.

The reality is that relationships are a part of life and that conflicts are a part of all relationships, whether these relationships are at work, within a marriage or friendship, or in our family life. Relationships are our healers. It's important that we ask ourselves to be vulnerable to choose between fear and love. It is not uncommon to experience the pressure of strong emotions when we are triggered and to have this lead to us blowing up. Conflicts often start with strong thoughts and feelings and if we don't learn how to express them, they will not go away, but will actually grow stronger. We need to have a voice to share our truth without shame or blame in any relationship. Where strong feelings and thoughts are repressed or are treated with disrespect understanding is not achieved and good listening and effective communication will not happen. In any continuing relationship, persistent feelings had better be expressed, repressing them will only damage the relationship.

Behavioral changes don't just happen with a few easy steps. It takes practice and more practice that must become a part of a consistent ongoing process. Communication and deep listening skills are part of our process for internal spiritual and emotional growth. The most efficient way is to establish the changes in our communication style that we want is to start by having an honest curiosity about ourselves, *Why do I do what I do?*, and to start paying attention and listening to ourselves when we are with others whom we trust, compassionate witnesses. Be mindful when we do react or act and watch our reactions. When do we not listen to others? When do we have a tendency to be critical or judgmental of others or of ourselves? When do we deny or overreact to our own thoughts and feelings? When is it that we react most strongly? When we know in a mindful way what we are doing and we understand and take the steps necessary to practice new skills, our lives become more meaningful and effective. It is slow, meticulous change and we need a proactive group of compassionate witnesses with whom to practice.

Take the time to create the good habit of meeting conflict with kindness. We know that there is no such thing as right and wrong or good and bad. It's a matter of practice, and practice is the process of easing toward change mindfully, slowly, gently. We offer compassionate statements and empathize with people who have been hurt or injured emotionally. That hurt, over time develops self-protective patterns that create a barrier against any further hurt or shame. People who come into our lives as lovers, as acquaintances, as mates at work, or as family members can trigger us so that we may experience that injury, that hurt, again. If we can give it a voice, say our truth without shame or blame, we can discharge some of the energy of that original injury. It is finding the courage to say our truth that creates freedom, that brings us back to our original self. It is a spiritual awakening that goes on every day only if we have acceptance and compassion for ourselves and others.

How do you practice improving presence, listening well, and effective communication?

Principles of Listening Well

- Be willing to learn about yourself
- Be mindful
- Understand and practice acceptance of the others perspective of the world
- Create an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion
- Be present for your own reactions
- Be patient with yourself and others
- Listen with your whole heart

Actions of Listening Well

- Practice being present with yourself (breathe, relax, feel, watch, allow)
 - Breathe
 - Relax your body and watch your breathing
 - Feel what you're feeling, ride the wave
 - Watch your feelings and the sensations that arise in your body, detach yourself from self-criticism and your reaction to others
 - Allow your feelings to be there
- Even as you listen attentively, listen with an optimistic heart to what is not being said
- Practice being present and maintaining contact
 - Create time with difficult issues to fully listen to the other's perspective
 - Stay through the whole conversation, roll with the wave of your own emotions
 - Bring your attention to the other through eye contact, soft eyes, sitting or standing at their level, and moving to a comfortable closeness while listening with them

Places where we can get stuck in our listening well

- Holding the right position
- Having outcomes for yourself, the other, or the situation - Let go into the *Mystery*
- Fear of criticism and shame

- Second-guessing - *I already know what you're going to say.*

Principles for Mindful Responding

- Drop the right position, your agenda
- Ask open questions to clarify their perceptions
- Hear what the other says. It's a statement of how they see things. Please take on their perspective.
- Be mindful with yourself and others
- Create an atmosphere of compassion for the dialogue
- Be present for your own triggers and for their reaction

Actions for Responding Well

- Listen well to what the other person is saying
- Paraphrase what you hear using empathy
- Wait to hear if your reflections and assumptions are correct
- Be curious to know if there is anything more they want to say
- Keep listening, reflecting, asking to see if they are correct
- When they are completely done with their statement, share your response clearly, taking full 100% ownership.
- We commonly use “I” statements. It is important to take 100% responsibility for our actions and feelings. If the other person becomes defensive, apologize and try again to respond mindfully.

Places where we can get stuck in our Mindful Responding

- Changing the subject and focus to yourself rather than listening to their perspective
- Preaching and telling them the right position, the *should*
- Interrogating by using probing questions, examining, suspiciously asking questions
- Advising, offering solutions, suggestions, and direction especially when unsolicited
- Judgment, criticism, absolute statements, blaming

Take time to create good habits of meeting conflict with kindness. We know that there is no such thing as right or wrong or good or bad. It's a matter of practice, and practice is the process of exploring change mindfully, slowly, gently.

Stephen R. Andrew LCSW, LADC, CCS, CGP is a storyteller, trainer, and the Chief Energizing Officer of Health Education & Training Institute. He maintains a compassion focused private practice in Portland, Maine USA where he also facilitates a variety of men's, co-ed, couples' and caregiver groups. Stephen is a member of the International Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) since 2003. He is a MIA:STEP trainer (Motivational Interviewing Assessment; Supervisory Tools for Enhancing Proficiency) for the New England ATTC since 2007. Stephen has been Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity trained and has over 100 hours of training in Motivational Interviewing. Stephen provides coaching and training domestically and internationally (Singapore, China, Holland, Sweden, Turkey & UK) for social service agencies, health-care providers, substance abuse counselors, criminal justice and other groups on Motivational Interviewing, addiction, co-occurring disorders, counseling theory, "challenging" adolescents, supervision and ethics for care professionals, men's work, and the power of group work, as well as supervising a coding/coaching laboratory and training for Motivational Interviewing. Stephen is the proud father of a 21 year-old son, Sebastian, and co-author of *Game Plan: A Man's Guide to Achieving Emotional Fitness*.