

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening entails accepting the feelings expressed whether or not they appear justified. We often resist a solution made for us; we would rather find our own solution. You don't need to talk the person out of painful feelings with reassurance. Try to tolerate your own feelings of distress as you listen to another person's intense emotions. Don't try to figure out (interpret) the problem for the person. If the person does not feel understood, they may become more frustrated and become less able to reach their own solution.

It's not necessary to try and give the person the answer. This prevents them from problem solving for themselves. Active listening helps the person define the problem for themselves, figure out what they are feeling and express the feeling, which then helps to release it. The notion of the counselor as facilitator is a fairly contemporary and Western one; other cultures may expect the counselor to be directive and to give advice. In these situations, you may need to explain your role and expectations of the counseling relationship a bit more.

WHAT IS NEEDED - A HELPFUL ATTITUDE

1. You want to hear what the other person is saying.
2. Your desire is to be helpful.
3. You endeavor to genuinely accept the other's feelings, whatever they might be, however different they may be from your own.
4. You trust in the other person's ability to handle their own problems, to work them through, and to find solutions.
5. You remember that feelings are transitory and not permanent; therefore, any feeling can be expressed without fear of getting lost in it, or harmed by it.

UNHELPFUL RESPONSES

Common, easily given responses that are generally unhelpful (note that some of these are therapeutic techniques rather than listening skills):

Ordering, directing, commanding
Warning, threatening
Moralizing,
Advising, giving solutions, suggestions (even if they ask for, these)
Lecturing, teaching, giving logical arguments
Interpreting, analyzing, diagnosing
Reassuring, sympathizing, consoling
Withdrawing, distancing, humoring
Attempts to distract

WHAT DOES ACTIVE LISTENING REQUIRE?

1. Your undivided attention to what the other is saying.
2. Your concern for the other, which should be as free as possible from your own needs.
3. Your understanding of the feelings behind the words the other is saying.
4. Your being in touch with your own feelings in order to avoid responding defensively to provocative statements by the other person.