

Learning to listen

Many relationship challenges centre around communication difficulties.

Listening to each other.

Being understood.

Being taken seriously.

Feeling as if the other person truly 'gets' us and cares about how we feel.

And yet, when we don't feel listened to, often it's not because the other person doesn't care. In many cases, they may not even realise how unheard we feel.

Many of us think of ourselves as good listeners. But listening well, especially when emotions are involved, can be much harder than we realise.

Often, when someone shares something difficult with us, our attention moves quickly towards solving the problem.

We may try to offer reassurance, advice, explanations, solutions, or a different perspective.

Sometimes we interrupt because we are eager to help. Sometimes we minimise because we want the other person to feel better. Sometimes we become defensive because the conversation leaves us feeling criticised, blamed, or as if we are failing in some way.

Usually, these responses come from our own discomfort rather than a lack of care or interest.

But while advice and reassurance can sometimes be helpful, many important conversations are not actually about finding the 'right' answer.

Often, what we are really looking for is to feel emotionally understood.

To feel that somebody is trying to understand our feelings, rather than trying to move us away from it too quickly.

Feeling listened to can help us feel calmer, safer, more connected, and less alone.

And over time, feeling emotionally heard within our relationships can strengthen trust and emotional intimacy.

Learning to listen well is not about becoming perfect communicators. Being human means that we will get things wrong all the time.

It is about becoming more emotionally available to one another, especially during difficult moments.

Small changes in the way we respond can make a significant difference to how safe, connected, and understood the other person feels.

Sympathy and Empathy

Sympathy often focuses on trying to make things better quickly.

Empathy focuses more on understanding the other person and staying emotionally present. Empathy does not mean agreeing with everything someone says. It means showing curiosity, emotional presence, and a willingness to understand their experience before moving into solutions.

Instead of...

"At least..."

"You're overthinking it."

"Here's what you should do..."

"I know exactly how you feel."

Try...

"That sounds really difficult."

"I can see why this has affected you."

"Do you want me to listen, help problem-solve, or both?"

"Tell me more about what this feels like for you."

Next time somebody shares something difficult with you, try slowing the conversation down slightly. Rather than immediately offering advice or reassurance, try:

- reflecting back what you heard
- noticing the feeling underneath the words
- asking a curious question
- checking whether they want support, solutions, or simply company in the feeling

Often, people remember less about the exact words we used, and more about how emotionally safe and understood they felt in our presence.