

Active Listening

Listening is a key component of creating openness in our relationships with others. But being a good listener does not come naturally for most people. Many of us would rather share a joke or story than listen to someone else's. When we are fully present to another person, receptive and attentive, we are "actively listening." This form of presence allows others to simply be themselves with us—open, honest, free, and vulnerable. They can more deeply share their hearts and lives with us if we create a space for them to do so. Just as cultivating an attitude of listening in prayer takes practice, actively listening to others is a skill that can be developed over time. You may already actively listen to some degree, but many of us struggle to inherently be attentive to others in this way. Below are some general characteristics of and tips for actively listening.

- *Allow the other to speak uninterrupted. (Stop talking! You can't listen while you are talking.)*
- *Maintain eye contact (where culturally appropriate) while you listen and share.*
- *Pay attention to body language—yours and the speaker's. Are you facing the other person? Remember that 85% of communication is nonverbal.*
- *Listen for emotions rather than facts.*
- *Empathize with what others are saying. Try to put yourself in their shoes.*
- *Don't evaluate. Understanding, not suggesting solutions, is the goal of effective listening.*
- *Be respectful: refrain from debating or criticizing.*
- *Only give advice when explicitly asked.*
- *Make the person speaking the expert. Ask open-ended questions.*
- *Rephrase his or her statements to be sure you understand what they are trying to say. When unclear, ask for further explanation.*
- *Understand and be comfortable with silence. They might not be ready to share or not sure what to say. Ask a question only if it seems necessary or would be helpful to them.*
- *Thank the person for their openness, especially when they have revealed something that may have been difficult to share. Let them know that you appreciate whatever they have been willing to share.*

Use the exercise below to help you practice and develop the skills of active listening...

1. With a partner, decide who will first be the listener and who will share.
2. Take a moment to each pray silently in your own way, asking for God's grace...
 - a. Listener: to be present, generous, and compassionate...
 - b. Sharer: to be open and honest...
3. The listener begins by asking the following questions, one at a time:
 - a. How did you hear about CLC and this group?
 - b. How would you briefly describe your relationship with God at this point in your life?
 - c. What in your life, relationships with others, or relationship with God is currently bringing you the most joy?
 - d. What is one struggle you are currently facing in life, your relationships with others, or your relationship with God?
4. The sharer takes 5-7 minutes to speak based on the listener's questions.
5. Switch roles and repeat steps 2-4.

Spiritual Autobiographies

Sharing Spiritual Journeys

Please prepare to share your spiritual history up till now within 15-20 minutes, either verbally and/or with aids such as written outlines, pictures, or diagrams. It is not necessary to cover every significant experiences or make everything fit together. Just try to give everyone a good, honest sense of your spiritual journey thus far.

You are invited to begin your sharing with a song that illustrates your spiritual journey, if you think it would be helpful. Or you might choose a concluding prayer instead. Begin with asking God for the gift of seeing your life as it is, through God's eyes and "heart."

There are no adequate criteria to describe one's spiritual journey. Hence there is no "right" or "wrong" way. The following questions can serve as starting points when preparing your sharing. You need not cover all the questions. Rather, focus on the ones most relevant to you. Please address the last 2 questions, however.

1. What has been your religious upbringing (during childhood, young adulthood, etc...)? What have been your experiences of church, retreats, ministry, outreach to the poor, justice work, etc.? You might want to focus on several significant spiritual or religious experiences.
2. Who have been influential in your faith life and how?
3. How do you imagine God/Jesus? Has it changed at various junctures and how?
4. What are your favorite Scriptures passages and/or prayers? What are some of your habits in living the spiritual life? How do you pray?
5. Do you notice any recurring threads or patterns in your life? If you were to choose a motif or image that describes your spiritual journey up to now, what would it be? (e.g. a road, hike, hanging bridge, river, plane trip, etc.)
6. What are your unique gifts and talents? Looking at your life thus far, what makes you truly happy? In the words of Pedro Arrupe SJ, what consistently "gets you out of bed in the morning" or "what breaks your heart"?