

Listening to Parents

Listening Partnerships for Parents



by Patty Wipfler

Listening to Parents

Listening Partnerships for Parents

Introduction

The Listening Partnership: A Special Relationship

Listening partnerships are agreements between two people to take turns listening. In many years of work with parents, we have found that if parents take regular turns listening to each other, each parent makes dependable gains in her life. The time to explore thoughts, set goals, and work through the tensions of everyday life helps parents care more effectively for themselves and their families. Listening partnerships are a simple and rewarding way to give and to get the support we parents need as we meet the challenges of nurturing our children.

Building a listening partnership is a very personal experiment. You can set up this kind of partnership with anyone you wish, and you can exchange listening time at your mutual convenience. How much time you devote to this exchange is entirely up to you. We recommend one and one-half to two hours each week for a listening exchange, although shorter time periods are certainly useful. In a listening session, you will listen for half the time, and then you'll have the opportunity to talk about yourself while your partner listens to you. Both you and your partner will agree to keep what is said confidential. Over time, you'll get to know each other well. You'll come to understand each other's struggles and appreciate each other's victories. Listening partnerships give parents a deeper understanding of themselves and of other parents. They allow parents to show the depth of love and commitment at the center of their lives.

To simplify the text, the parent and the client are referred to as "she," and the listener and the counselor are referred to as "he," when reference to people of both genders is intended.

A listening partnership will be most effective when each listener acts upon this generous assumption: *Each person is deeply loving and intelligent by nature, and each person is the real expert on his or her own affairs.* As you listen, your role will be to help your partner focus on *her* thinking, goals, and experience. When it is your turn to talk, she will pay close attention to *your* thoughts and feelings. Over time, the respect you offer each other will help to build your confidence in your own caring and intelligence. You will more successfully tackle and learn from the challenges you face.

This handbook will first outline how to listen effectively, how to use a listener's attention, and how to set up a listening partnership. Lastly, you will find a summary of what we have learned about the key issues for parents in our many years of listening to them. We hope that the information here will guide you well as you build support for yourself as a mother or father. You deserve the same kind of loving attention and dedication from others that your children receive from you. Take courage, find another willing parent, and set out together to build support for yourselves with the tools of listening.



Beginning a Listening Partnership

Listening, One Person at a Time

When we assume the role of listener, it takes some practice to learn to focus our attention. We have acquired conversational habits that interfere with good listening. In ordinary conversation, each person has permission to interrupt others whenever she sees fit, and to shift the focus of the discussion at will. Many people feel the obligation in conversation to carry the ball when a subject has been exhausted, or when the conversational partner is shy. There is often an element of competition, too: we hope to appear attractive and smart as we navigate conversational waters. Finally, we use conversation to accomplish many different tasks. We exchange ideas and opinions, we gather and give information, we let others know how we feel, we pursue every kind of relationship. With your listening partner, your goal will be much more narrowly defined.

In a listening partnership, it is the listener's goal to help his listening partner unleash her full intelligence. That is all. Because the focus of this interaction is well defined, it can become a very powerful one. Ordinary conversation allows our minds to wander and gather odd bits of news and an unpredictable variety of perspectives. A listening partnership forms a narrow but reliable path toward each partner's improved use of her intelligence. This path is traveled by one partner at a time.

In a listening partnership, one person listens while the other talks. The parent who is listening takes the role of "counselor," devoting his full attention to his partner's concerns. The other partner (we shall call her the "client" while it's her turn to think and talk) will follow her own train of thought.

For example, in one informal five-minute listening time a parent at a day-care center made an important discovery. The teacher had told her that her son had been irritable and upset for most of the day. The mother began to talk; the teacher listened. She told the teacher how stressful the past week had been for her. Her son's

crankiness felt like the last straw! She talked about pressures at work, her husband's business trip, and an upsetting phone call from her sister. At one point, she made an "I'm overwhelmed!" expression, and laughed a bit. Her mind then turned back to her son, and she wondered what might be troubling him. She said that he had been grumpy last week, and she had taken him to the doctor, who discovered an ear infection. He was on medication, so that couldn't be it. What else could it be? Then she stopped: Wait a minute! What if the antibiotics hadn't taken care of the infection? Deciding to take him to the doctor again, she went home with a way to address at least one of her pressing concerns. Her child did indeed still have an ear infection.

The mother's own problem-solving power was released by simple listening, which allowed her to briefly attend to a load of difficulties, and then to concentrate on her son's difficulty. Interest, respect and time were all that was required of the listener to give this mother effective assistance.

The First Four Principles of Effective Listening

As listener, in the "counselor" role, there are four basic steps to your job. (We will discuss a fifth important principle in the next section.) The principles are straightforward, but it will take thought and practice to apply them. As you follow these guidelines in a listening partnership, you will find yourself listening more effectively and building better relationships as a parent, spouse, worker, friend, and community leader. To listen effectively:

- Respect your listening partner, and the power of your own attention.
- Pay attention to your partner's issues, not your own, during her turn.
- Identify the upset that your partner has chosen to work on.
- Help your partner to release the emotional tension she talks about.

Let's look at these four principles more closely.

Respect your listening partner, and the power of your own attention.

The first step is to adopt the assumption that your listening partner is intelligent, loving, and capable of building excellent relationships. Difficulties have arisen because she has been confused and hurt many times in her life through no fault of her own. Those hurts sometimes interfere with her ability to learn, love, and enjoy the challenges before her. As counselor, decide to give her your best attention. Assume that your listening and caring will make a real difference to her. When you make a commitment to listen well, you provide the safety she needs to think freely. As trust between you grows, she will proceed to set meaningful goals for herself and to release the tensions that keep her from reaching those goals.

This approach of complete respect has several important implications:

- It means that the parent has always tried her very best to care well and to do the right thing.
- It means that when the parent doesn't function well, it is because she has been hurt in some significant way, not because she's a "bad" person or has a "bad" personality. She is never to be blamed or reproached for her difficulties.
- It means that her rigidities (for instance, the fact that she always gets angry when her children roughhouse) are probably a reflection of how she was hurt when *she* was young.
- It means that she will be smart enough to use your respect and attention with increasing efficiency. With your assistance as listener, she can move away from actions that reflect how she was hurt, toward actions that reflect her caring, love, and intelligence.

In short, view the parent as a good and valiant person, burdened by rigid responses that come from the times when she was hurt. If

your actions as counselor are based on trust in her intelligence, her caring, and her power to meet challenges, you won't go far wrong.

Pay attention to the client's issues, not your own.

The second task of the counselor is a difficult one. You must keep your own issues, stories and reactions neatly tucked away, so that your listening partner has all your attention for *her* issues, stories and feelings. Your issues are important, of course, but the agreement you have made is that you will examine them during *your* turn. There are three common conversational habits you must avoid in order to really listen to your client's issues:

- **We tend to try to tell our own stories.**

Most of us don't realize how often we pull people's attention toward our own issues and thoughts. Here is an example of how a client might bring up an issue, only to have the counselor steer her attention onto his own story.

Client: "I am really having a hard time with my daughter's teacher. My daughter comes home very discouraged from school, and says that Ms. Smith doesn't like her, and that now the whole class doesn't like her. I talked to Ms. Smith once, and she seemed to be OK. I couldn't . . ."

Counselor: "I know who you're talking about! I have friends whose son had her last year. They were unhappy with her, too. Boy it's really awful when your child gets stuck with a teacher like that . . ."

In normal conversation, this kind of response is usually thought of as friendly sympathy. People intend to show that they "know how that feels," thinking that the other person will be comforted. As a listening partner, you are not trying to comfort the parent. You are there to help her use her intelligence to tackle a problem. Although you will have many experiences that are similar to your listening partner's, there is no need to point them out during her talking time. To support the parent's thinking, you will want to

give a response that encourages her to explore her own thoughts further. For example:

Client: “I’ve talked to Ms. Smith once, and I couldn’t tell whether my daughter just thinks she’s not liked, or whether the teacher really does give her a hard time. I just don’t know what to do!”

Counselor, with interest: “What’s your best guess about what’s going on?”

or

Counselor, warmly: “I’m sure you can figure it out. What have you imagined you might do?”

It is very important to keep your comments to yourself. When you are the client, it may be necessary to remind your listening partner to do the same.

- **We tend to interrupt with our reactions.**

We also tend to interrupt a client’s time with our emotional reactions to her story. We are under the impression that if our client is feeling sad, for instance, she will feel better if we jump in and join her in sadness. In actuality, when we jump in we stop offering a hand to the client, who is looking for a way to gain perspective on the puddle of feelings she’s standing in.

For example, a client might begin by telling you that her child had emergency surgery last week. An effective listener might say briefly “Oh, I’m sorry” and touch her hand or, if they know each other well, put her arm around her as she continues to relate the incident and her feelings. A good listener will curb his impulse to draw attention to his own reactions. In ordinary conversation, the parent would be interrupted quickly by the reactions of others, whose stories would overtake her attempt to sort through her situation. (“Oh my gosh! That must have been terrible! Poor little fellow—and he’s such a sweet boy! You must be exhausted! Why, when my child went to the hospital, I . . .”)

- **We tend to ask questions to satisfy our curiosity.**

Another way we lapse into paying attention to our own issues is by asking questions out of curiosity. We are used to picking over what someone else says, the same way we pick over oranges at the market. We look for the juiciest topics, and examine them for our use. In a listening partnership, you need to listen so the other parent can talk and think, not so that you can satisfy your curiosity. This is hard to do! Your interest in your client is essential; it encourages her to talk fully about herself. But questions such as “Oh, you used to live in Georgia! My wife is from there—how did you like it?” or “You have your children on the weekends—does that mean you have joint custody?” will pull your client away from her train of thought, and put her to work filling your requests for information. Don’t even ask questions out of curiosity if your client stops talking and doesn’t know what to say next. She may not be used to trusting her own thought process. You can set an example of relaxed respect by not “rescuing” her from silence. Instead, warmly encourage her to say the next thought on her mind. Let her know she’s doing fine, and that you’re delighted to pay attention while she sorts things through quietly.

These first two tasks, employing an attitude of respect and clearing your own issues out of the client’s way, prepare you to move toward effective assistance as counselor. The next steps in listening will thoroughly challenge and engage you.

Identify the hurt that the client has chosen to work on.

We often assume that everything a person says and does is part of her personality. “Oh, don’t mind George! He’s always a real grouch just before he goes to visit his parents,” or, “Sheila is like that. Very touchy about her kids’ behavior. Once they put their fingers in the pitted olives at my house, and she almost spanked them.” As counselor, it’s your job to try to see your client’s attitudes, actions and reactions as a set of *two very different kinds of human response*. On the one hand, you have a client’s unique intelligence, warmth, love of life, and love of the people close to her.



On the other hand, you have rigid behaviors that reflect the ways in which she was hurt. George, for example, was not born a grouchy person. He gets grouchy before visiting his parents because he is gripped by some unresolved tension that won't let him enjoy

his life. Sheila does not reprimand her children because she was born high-strung, but because unwanted (perhaps long-standing) tension mars her judgement about what is healthy children's play.

The following guidelines will help you learn to identify the areas of tension your client brings to you in a session:

- **The hurt the client chooses to work on will surface.**

As people talk about themselves to a good listener, they begin to use the warmth of his attention. As they talk they make a key hurt more and more apparent, either by talking about it directly, or by demonstrating it to the listener indirectly. You will notice that your client talks with interest about her life for awhile. Then you may begin to hear a theme of hurt or confusion repeat itself as she speaks. However, the client is not necessarily aware that she has brought up an issue. People become so accustomed to the hurts glued to them that they take their own rigidities for granted. Here are two examples of clients who reveal the feeling that has stolen their enthusiasm and initiative. One is quite direct, the other is less so.

Client: "I'm so exhausted, I don't really even feel like talking to you tonight. I almost called you to cancel our listening time. It's not you, it's my life! Both the boys have been sick, and Harry was out of town until Tuesday. I stayed home Monday, but *had* to go to work on Tuesday. My mom, bless her heart, came and helped, but I can't rely on her all the time. I hate to have her see my life

in such a mess. I just feel wiped out. Why don't I have a better handle on things?"

This client is less direct:

Client: "Well, I don't know what to do. What am I supposed to talk about? I really haven't got anything much to say. Hmmm, I guess it's been a pretty normal week. I did my truck run to Salt Lake City. Three days, but not bad—came home tired. My boy is having a tough time in school, I guess. He got suspended for throwing some food at another kid. Now, what do you do about that, huh? Boy, kids are hard to figure! I get home, and it happened two days ago already, and what am I supposed to do?"

Can you recognize the themes of hurt in each of these sessions? Each person has just begun to talk, yet the key issues are already right out on the table. The first parent needs to work on her feelings of exhaustion. She is telling and probably showing the counselor through her posture that she's not her fun-loving, energetic self. Feeling tired has compromised her ability to function. Yes, she is physically tired, but some additional hurt makes her feel discouraged about her life and about herself. She has asked her listener to help her focus on her feelings of tiredness and the discouragement behind them.

In the second example, the father begins his session by stating the issue quite clearly. He repeats it several times: he feels like he doesn't know what to do. The feeling is pervasive enough to attach itself to the listening session, to his child's difficulty, and to his attitude toward young people in general. He lets the counselor know very clearly that this feeling is in his way of taking effective initiative in his life, but he doesn't say "I never feel like I know what to do. Would you help me with this? It disables me." He leaves a number of clues for the counselor, but is so used to this feeling that he takes it for granted.

- **If the key issue is not apparent to you, look for the clues your client leaves.**

As you sharpen your powers of observation, you will learn to trust your client to reveal her issues to you if she does not define them outright. The key issue will sometimes surface through a phrase or comment that is especially animated, or that receives special emphasis. Also be on the lookout for a subject, phrase, facial expression, tone of voice, or posture that is repeated twice or three times as your client talks. Phrases, words or gestures that seem to carry more feeling or that appear more than once will probably put you hot on the trail of an issue that deserves attention. For example:

Client: “My son has been having a terrible week. He can’t seem to get himself started doing this big report for school, and now that he’s behind, it’s even worse. He lies around and won’t get anything done. I stay away from him when he gets like this, because you know what? I can feel myself getting ready to (parent makes a slight slapping motion with her hand) give him this! I have almost never hit him, but boy, when I see him lying around like that, I . . .”

Counselor, with a friendly, interested tone: “What was that?”
(Makes same slapping motion.)

Client, laughing a bit: “Yeah, but you see, I don’t really want to hit him. I’ve been very careful not to, as best I could. It just crosses my mind.”

Counselor, still friendly: “Talking about it won’t hurt him. What was that motion again? Like this?” (Makes slapping motion.)

Client, laughing briefly: “Yeah. I guess that’s it. I just have to go away when I feel like doing that.”

Counselor: “Did you ever get slapped like that?”

Client: “Oh, yeah. Lots of times. Mostly my mom. When she couldn’t stand us any more, we’d get a swat out of nowhere. Seemed like we never really could see it coming. Whew! One time, when my sister and I . . .”

The client begins to tell the story of how she was hurt when she was young. This is one of the incidents of hurt which lie behind her inability to reach out to her son now.

When you help your client focus on a problem, it will often lead her to talk about events in her past. Many of our present-day hurdles are set higher than we can jump because of hurt we were saddled with as children. So when your client’s story leads back to unhealed hurts that have been with her a long while, your assistance has been effective. She is not wandering away from the subject at hand. She is using your attention to locate the roots of her daily upsets.



- **Show interest in the client’s story.**
Don’t offer your opinion about it.

When you hear your client telling you about actions that you think might reflect a hurt, it’s your job as counselor to help her focus there. Please don’t psychologize. Don’t say things like “Oh, it sounds like you have a lot of anger left over from your relationship with your mother” or “I suspect you get so stressed because there was some harsh discipline in your family when you

were a child.” The client needs to figure things out for herself, because that is the only way the information will be of real use to her. An effective listener simply shows interest in the details of the story and the client’s feelings about it. For example, this father is given effective listening:

Client: “I have to go visit my parents next weekend—they live up in Chicago—and I just don’t want to go. I’m tense at work and mad at my kids. Last night, they really got on my nerves. I was after them for everything they did. But I think it’s really this trip that’s bugging me.”

Counselor: “What bugs you about it?”

Client: “I don’t know, I don’t know. I really don’t know. I’m just upset for some reason. I feel like cancelling the trip, but I know I can’t. The way I’m dealing with it is to work a lot harder, so I don’t have to think about it. You know how that goes.”

Counselor: “What might it be?”

Client: “Darn it, I don’t know. It didn’t used to be this way—I used to be glad to see the folks. Used to look forward to it. Right now I sure don’t want to go. I keep thinking of all the possible reasons to cancel.”

Counselor: “What was the first time you remember not wanting to see them like this?”

Client: “Gee, I don’t know. Hmmmm. Guess the first time I sort of dreaded it was when my dad had his heart attack. I didn’t want to see him lying in the hospital—I waited three whole days before I went up, but I still had to go to that hospital. Ugh.” (He makes a pained expression.)

Counselor: “What happened when you went to the hospital?”

At this point, they are getting somewhere. The counselor was persistent with his simple questions. Now, the client begins to talk about his feelings about seeing his father helpless and ill.

He grows quieter, and tears come to his eyes as he remembers the incident in more detail. There may be additional roots to his tension: perhaps he later talks about a favorite uncle who died in the hospital, to his great grief and shock as a child.

- **If necessary, help your client focus on the hurt.**

Many times, a client will focus on an issue without much help from you. If she seems to be staying with one subject, just listen. She's doing fine. Simple, interested listening will build a base of trust with you that will eventually allow her to relieve the tension she carries.

Other times, a client will brush over something you think might be significant, and move quickly onward to other topics. She may touch briefly on it now and then, each time skittering away to something less personal. Wait and listen. If you think she might be afraid to focus on a topic that has surfaced several times, let her bring it up again, and then ask her, "Can we stay on that for a few minutes?" or "What's that like for you, anyway?" Your encouragement may be what's needed to allow her to focus there. On the other hand, she may decide to put it away until she feels safer with you. In that case, simply remember that the issue awaits more trust, or a time when higher priority issues have been resolved. As counselor, your role is to invite a client to focus on a topic she has raised. However, the client is in charge of her listening time and will exercise her judgement on what issues are important enough and safe enough to address.

Help your client focus on the hurt by asking simple questions about it. Your aim is to help her outline the history and the present-day workings of this hurt. Inquire about how it feels to her, what triggers her bad feelings or rigid reactions, what thoughts come to her mind as she talks about this hurt, or what her first memories are of feeling this way or seeing someone act this way. Remember that if you are asking questions to satisfy your curiosity, the situation will become much less safe for her. Also remember not to try to analyze the client or to assume that

your ability to name the hurt is of key assistance. It will be *the client's story* that will bring fresh understanding and release of tension. Here are examples of the kinds of questions that might help a client focus more fully on the issue she has raised.

Counselor: "Can you say more about that?"

"Say that again." (This invites a client to focus by repeating a phrase or exclamation she has emphasized.)

"When did this begin?"

"When did you first feel like this?"

"What was the first time you remember this happening to you?"

"Exactly what is it that makes you feel this way?"

"What does this remind you of?"

"Who does he/she remind you of?"

"What does this make you feel like doing (or saying)?"

"Was there ever a time when it wasn't this way?"

Help your partner release the emotional tension caused by the hurt.

Once your client has focused on the issue she wants help with, it's time to take the next step. You are poised, ready to help her to release the emotional tension she has told you about. We have not been taught much about how to shed feelings of upset. Most of us assume that bad feelings and the rigid reactions that go with them are part of our lot in life. We treat them as something to be suffered and endured.

However, there is a natural way to release tension that we tried to use as children. It is possible to regain the ability to shed our griefs, fears, frustrations, and embarrassments day by day, so that they don't drain our precious energy and enthusiasm. Once bad feelings are shed, we become much more ourselves. We are able to be more hopeful and more patient with ourselves and others.

We become more determined and better able to set things right in our families and communities. Our parenting becomes more intentional, more reflective of the love we have for our children. The listening partnership is an ideal environment in which to relearn the use of this healing process. We shall take a quick side trip here to explain a bit more about how people get hurt, and how they can undo the tensions that make their lives difficult.

To explain this healing process, we shall begin by talking about the lives of children, because children are real experts at healing from upset feelings. We also refer to childhood because, if you are like most people, as you talk more about yourself, you will find that many of the tensions you now battle have their roots in your early years, when you were most easily hurt.

People are naturally trusting, loving, cooperative and eager for challenges.

Do you remember how toddlers tend to approach their lives? They are ready for adventure the moment they wake up in the morning. They trust you and the other people they know, offering friendship and fun to anyone who will play with them thoughtfully. They have boundless energy. Nothing daunts them. They can fall hundreds of times as they learn to walk and run, but they never even think of giving up. When you sweep the kitchen floor, they are right there, eager to do this important work. After they've pushed the broom around with great concentration, they are proud of themselves for a job well done. Their faith in their own goodness is strong. Their delight in life is enormous. *Your confidence and pride in yourself was once this complete.*

Every hurt hits a young child hard.

The minute you scold a toddler, it's as if his world has caved in. He might look stricken for a second, then burst out crying. Or if you get irritated and try to take his broom away, he might throw himself on the ground in a stormy tantrum. When he is sunny and confident, there are few people who are more aware and alive than a toddler. When he feels hurt, there are few people more completely unhappy. Even small incidents of hurt are deeply felt. You probably remember how thoroughly hurt you felt at times when you were young. *When you were a child, many incidents of hurt hit you hard.*

Children blame themselves for the hurts they suffer.

When children get hurt by thoughtlessness, mistreatment or circumstance, they are saddled with emotional tension caused by the hurt. A hurtful experience, no matter how insignificant it may seem to an adult, always makes a child feel bad about himself. Children interpret the incidents that hurt them in a thoroughly personal way. They assume that the troubles that befall them are a sign that there is something very wrong with *them*.

Hence, when a child is made fun of by a jealous sibling, the child can't see that he is being hurt because his sibling is full of tension. He believes he is being called names because something about him really is stupid, dumb or bratty. Every time a child feels hurt, he internalizes a strong impression that something is wrong with him. This impression causes his behavior to lose flexibility, much like a pebble in your shoe hampers your stride as you walk.

You, too, will tend to blame yourself for your difficulties. You have been hurt through no fault of your own. However, because your troubles have endured, you are pulled to believe that your bad feelings and inability to think are your fault.

Unhealed hurts leave scars in the form of rigid, irrational behavior.

Every hurt that goes unresolved robs the child of some of his wonderfully flexible, inventive intelligence. For example, instead of resuming play with his brother, the child who was called names might withdraw from him or he become consistently aggressive in his own defense. The child will lose his ability to notice the times when his brother is relaxed and able to play well with him. The stored hurts cut the child's behavior options down to one or two set approaches. They block his ability to understand the nuances of the present situation. Instead of learning, he is set up to react in a stereotyped way, because of the unhealed hurt of earlier incidents.

Children know how to heal from a hurt.

If a child has a parent who will stop, listen and stay close when things go wrong, he will do his best to shed the bad feelings he is saddled with. He will cry if he is sad, tremble and perspire and struggle if he has been frightened, have a tantrum if he is frustrated, laugh away his

light fears and embarrassment, and yawn to release physical tension. As these somewhat messy and time-consuming activities take place, the hurtful impression left by the incident (for example, “What you want is unimportant,” “You are too much trouble,” “Brother can’t stand you”) is gradually erased from the child’s experience. If he is allowed to cry, tremble, and storm all the way through the upset, his full confidence and pleasure in himself will return. When he is finished, he sees the hurtful incident as a harmless glitch in his life, not as a permanent setback.

For example, I know two brothers who were two and four when they decided to race each other. Their mother was outside too, playing attentively with them. The older brother won the first race, and the mother cheered for him, and then embraced the younger son, telling him that he had run very well. They raced again, and this time, the younger son won. The mother came over and hugged him with warm congratulations for coming in first. He turned to her and burst into tears, saying “No! No! No, Mommy!” The mother continued to hold him, mystified by his outburst. She didn’t understand what he meant by “No!” so she listened and told him now and then that she was glad he came in first. Finally, he looked at her and said, “No, I’m *second!* Tommy is first, and *I’m* second!” He continued to cry hard, while she repeated a few more times that he had come in first, and that his brother had been second. After fifteen minutes, he stopped crying, relaxed with her a minute, and asked, “Was I first?” When his mother answered “Yes,” he went off serenely to play.

What had happened? Over time, the younger child had internalized the rigid impression that he was always second, and carried some sadness about his supposed limitation. When he won the race and his mother was delighted, the feelings of hurt behind this rigid impression were countered, by the reality of coming in first. He cried hard, because his put-down of himself could no longer exist side by side with his clear victory. Strong feelings were shed and the hurt was lifted. He was then able to gain the fresh understanding that he, the second child, could actually be first. This is how the healing process works.

Like children, when adults laugh, cry, tremble and perspire, have a tantrum, or yawn while they talk about their troubles, emotional tension lifts. Their ability to think and act more flexibly is restored. They become more reasonable, more fun-loving, more sure that they are good people, inside and out.



This healing process is often interrupted.

Under most circumstances, adults rarely find enough safety to use this simple, powerful healing process. Most of us had parents who thought that it was their responsibility to stop our deeply felt emotions, or who looked upon this healing process as misbehavior. We had to learn to stop ourselves from crying, having tantrums, and showing our fear. With no chance to shed feelings of upset, we had greater and greater difficulty recovering our self-respect and enthusiasm for life each time we were hurt.

Although you don't often see adults making use of it, this healing process is natural. Every child is born knowing how to use it. Every infant assumes that her parents will listen with care while she cries through her upsets at the end of each challenging day. The listening partnership is an environment in which an adult can relearn the use of this natural process, and put it to work to resolve the tensions that interfere with loving, playing, learning, and taking full charge of life.

Listening gets this healing process started.

The listening partnership creates a framework in which, much of the time, this healing process begins by itself. Simple, respectful listening, over a period of time, allows a person to come to trust the listener. This trust gradually allows the client to loosen the tight control she has had to keep over her tears, trembling, and laughter. To get the healing process started, simply keep your attention on your listening partner in a friendly and persistent way, time after time. *Your attitude of respect, interest, and confidence in your client will counter the negative feelings left by incidents of hurt in her life.* For example, with you there letting her know she's good and courageous, your client won't be able to blindly assume that she is a timid person. She can perspire and laugh as she makes plans to speak up for the first time at the upcoming parent meeting at her child's school. With you telling him confidently that he is a loving father, your client might at first laugh in disbelief, but soon begin to cry because he trusts you, and you have brought into question his rigid conviction that he is to blame for his child's difficulties.

To repeat: the positive attitude a counselor adopts toward the client is a powerful force in a listening partnership session. This attitude, consistently held over time, provides the client with the support she lacked when she was first hit by hurt. As she talks about her difficulties now, your attention fills an unmet need. The healing process that was interrupted for lack of a committed listener many years ago can now proceed at last.

This process of tension release takes time, but it is very dependable. With enough release of emotional tension, adults can transform their approach and attitudes in life very thoroughly, from the inside out. They can overcome irrationalities that have burdened them since their

early years. After several listening sessions, you will probably find that, now and again, your listening partner has begun to laugh, tremble and perspire, tantrum, cry, or yawn. The healing process is shifting into gear.

Now we can return to the fourth principle of effective listening: helping your client release emotional tension. You can further the healing process in the following ways:

- **Help your client laugh.**

Laughter relieves tension with surprising effectiveness. Any time a client begins to chuckle, try to help her focus on the thought that made her laugh. You might repeat the word she was saying when she laughed, with the same inflection she gave it, or laugh warmly along with her. When she stops to try to compose herself, delightedly repeat the phrase again, or nod with a knowing look, to see if your enjoyment of the thought will let her laugh again. People automatically try to pull themselves together after a short outburst of laughter: this is the split-second when your skill as counselor can make a big difference. If you can figure out how to dab a little attention on the funny thought again, your client will be off and laughing once more. Sometimes, when a client really gets going, she doesn't know what she's laughing about any more. That's fine. The healing process is galloping along at a great pace. You have made it very safe.

A curious aspect of laughter is that, when pursued, it quickly builds a thorough kind of safety and a sense of connection between counselor and client that is hard to match. This often allows the client's deeper feelings to flow. Five or ten minutes into laughter, your client may shift quickly to trembling or crying. We see this in our children: give them closeness and laughter, and often they find some small excuse to cry mightily. A smart counselor will hunt carefully for little laughs that can be extended into long ones, for these will lead to a listening time rich in trust and the release of tension.

- **Help your client work on fears.**

The feeling of fear tends to make people quiet and passive. This reaction is rather like the way some animals play dead to escape danger. Another strong tendency is for people to pretend they are fine, when they are actually quite afraid. It's a tactic many of us had to adopt in childhood to protect ourselves from ridicule. When a client quietly and calmly reports that she feels afraid, invite her to become active and loud in some way. Sometimes it's helpful to ask a client to look scared and give either a playful or a full-voice scream, depending on the intensity of the incident that she is working on. It can also be very helpful to ask the client to stand up and push against you forcefully, as if to finally meet the feared person or situation with her full strength.

Once a client begins to tremble and perspire, keep encouraging her to do the same actions or to say the same words over and over. These actions or words unlock the healing process: the client will elaborate on them as she continues to focus on the hurt. If your client says that she is getting dizzy or light-headed, you need to move in closer to her. There are some terrors that can be shed only if the counselor holds the client close and keeps saying confident, encouraging things to her. For example, in working through an incident of fear caused by being beaten as a child, you might first ask the client to say, again and again, "Don't you dare touch me. Don't you *ever* do that to me again!" with full anger and conviction. As the healing process begins, she will actually become afraid again, and will need you to hold her close and cheer her on. For example, you might say in a strong voice "Tell her again. Come on, keep telling her to let you alone. You can do it. Tell her again. Don't let her get away with it!" Helping a client tremble and perspire to release heavy fear is the one time you will need to talk frequently with confidence as counselor. Your strong encouragement keeps her from folding inward again in quiet, unproductive passivity.

- **Help your client cry.**

What makes it safe enough to cry is very different for each person. Each of our families dealt with deep emotion differently. Some of us can only cry alone at first, because crying was absolutely forbidden from the time we were infants. Some of us can only cry fully when being held by a thoughtful, caring person. Some of us cry fully as long as no one makes a big deal of moving in to hold us. Some of us cry while we laugh hard. To find out what allows your client to keep crying, you will need to experiment. Try what you think would be supportive, and notice the results. If you move in thoughtfully to embrace your client and she stops crying, move quietly back again to your former position. Now you know that this move, although well-meant, wasn't helpful. If you give her hand a squeeze and she cries harder, do it again, and try moving a bit closer, too.



Generally, people long to be held and understood while they cry, even if at present they can only manage to cry alone. As you build trust with your client, you'll want to gradually move towards closeness as counselor, but only if the client can keep crying. Moving in too close too quickly can make a client afraid that you want or expect something from her. Increase your familiarity with her gradually. You can also ask her, after a listening time, what she wants you to do when she begins to cry.

- **Help your client work on the grief and fear beneath her anger.**

What we call anger is actually a tightly packed lump of sadness and fear which won't release because the client feels alone, mistrustful, and unloved. First, a person needs to talk about her anger, where it comes from, and how it is triggered. If this doesn't loosen any laughter, tears, or trembling, then it's time to decide how to help her shake the upset loose.

For many people, anger is a forbidden emotion, and much energy is spent keeping angry feelings under wraps. If this seems to be the case, asking the client to show her anger fully will often help her to get to the tears and trembling beneath. Getting her to act angrily is not actually your goal, although that is what you are asking her to do. Letting her show her anger may get the healing process started. She then can cry and tremble through the hurt feelings that lie buried beneath the angry stance.

However, if your client tends to let her anger nip and bite at the people close to her, but can't seem to tremble, laugh or cry as she talks about it, you might take a very different approach. Encourage her to say what a vulnerable, hurt child might say before tight mistrust sets in. For example, "Help me. I'm scared" or "Don't you care about me?" or "Why are you hurting me this way?" This may remind her of the hurt feelings she has not yet felt safe enough to talk about. Your understanding and support may help soften her stance enough to allow these feelings to show at last.

- **Help your client yawn.**

Parents usually have a rather pressing load of tensions. When they receive attention from a listener, their minds go right to the job of untangling their thoughts and their feelings. Emotional tensions always seem to get the lion's share of a client's time. However, at some point you may find your client yawning a few times in a row as she talks. She is releasing physical tension. Don't interrupt her or try to get her to do something more "important." This release

of physical tension can help a client significantly. A client's mind often wanders from topic to topic as she yawns, skimming lightly over thoughts that are not heavily charged with emotion. Simply be pleased with her, and let her direct things. She is using the healing process well.

- **Help your client with tantrums.**

Tantrums heal frustration. You will seldom have a listening partner who feels safe enough to have a tantrum with you. If adults work on frustration at all, they tend to do it on the spot, unpredictably, in the presence of the people most committed to them. This means that partners, best friends, and children might witness the short, vigorous tantrum of a parent every now and then. All that is needed from a listener, spouse, or friend is to pay attention and keep from responding with upset. A tantrum is full of noise, body heat, and flailing motion. It's not mean or spiteful violence. The client might jump up and down, or throw books and papers without noticing what she's throwing, or find herself pounding on the sofa. It's a quick, spontaneous outburst of noise and motion. It relieves the feeling of intolerable frustration. The client will usually feel a bit embarrassed afterward, or will proceed to have a good cry. She will have shed considerable tension.

The safety to release emotional tension as we talk about our lives is built slowly, through many listening partnership sessions. Your client will probably use her first listening partnership sessions mainly to talk, to get a sense of who you are, and to see how well you will listen to her. Probably the best way to learn what a client needs from you as counselor is to notice what seems to work well in each of your client's sessions and in your own. What works well with you won't necessarily be the magic key for your listening partner. However, you can study the basic principles of listening as they apply to each of you, and keep experimenting. Most of the valuable learning we do is done in just this way, experiment by experiment.



When You Take the Role of Client

When you take the role of client, you have the opportunity to examine any aspect of your life. You will most likely feel a bit embarrassed or awkward at first, since few of us are accustomed to having the undivided attention of another person at our disposal. You can trust yourself to use your counselor's attention in the best way possible, in spite of any initial feelings of uncertainty that you may have. You are a smart person who is exploring a genuinely new situation. Every thought and inclination you have while attention is focused on you is important and worth talking about.

Begin with the story of your life.

One good way to begin is to tell your counselor the story of your life, from your earliest memory all the way up to today. Tell it as the incidents come to your mind, in chronological order. This will allow you to review your life, and to see if there are key issues that surface again and again as you talk. Notice which memories inspire you to laugh, cry, yawn or tremble. Put a mental marker on these, so that you can go back and talk about them more fully in a later session. These are good stories to start with, because the healing process is accessible when you focus on them.

Talk about any uneasiness you may feel.

Most of us have not been in a situation like a listening partnership. We feel at a loss when someone simply listens to us for forty-five minutes or an hour! In particular, some people feel unsure of themselves if the listener doesn't ask questions or respond with

opinions. If this is true for you, let your counselor know every time you feel uncomfortable. He shouldn't interrupt or ask you questions to alleviate your discomfort. But you can ask him for reassurance with such questions as "Am I doing all right?" or "Are you still with me?" or "Do you know what I mean?", to which he should respond with short assurances that don't take up your time to talk. Tell him how uneasy you feel, and try to think of why this might be so hard for you. Does it remind you of any situation you've been in before? What is it you want? To know that he likes you? To know that he thinks you are making sense? To know that you're not alone in your experience? You probably feel some precise need. See if you can identify it.

It may take you awhile to get through the initial awkwardness of being listened to. Don't give up! This discomfort has probably made you stumble in many other situations in your life. It will be worthwhile to spend time and attention unravelling its causes and working it through in listening sessions.

Follow your thoughts.

In general, follow the thoughts your mind sends up as you talk. Since our earliest years, most of us have been required to censor what we say in most social situations ("Be nice, now!" "Don't say things like that!" "If you talk like that, I'm going to send you to your room!" "Tell him you're sorry right now!") It can take awhile to learn to follow what you are *really* thinking—exaggerations, wild images, impolite attitudes, and all the rest. It's usually these more vivid and unruly thoughts that offer a trail toward laughter, tears, or working through fears. Don't worry if your train of thought skips from one thing to another. You are not required to think in essay form, with a beginning, middle, and end. You will get to know your own mind better if you follow your thoughts exactly as they appear.

Notice your counselor.

Like children, grown-ups tend to become enthusiastic about each other when they are able to pay attention to each other in an unhurried fashion. As he hears more about your life, your counselor

will grow fond of you and eager to help you use the healing process. In each session, try to notice that your counselor is really listening, and is genuinely interested in you. If noticing his attention makes you feel shy, then say so, and perhaps hide a little, just to help you laugh some of your shyness away. After so many years of little or no concentrated attention, it's no wonder some of us feel shy!

Ask for your counselor's help.

If there is a particular reassurance that you are longing to hear, ask for it. For instance, "You know, I feel so worried all the time. I worry that I won't make the right decision about my mother coming to live with us. Do you think I will be able to figure out a good way to do this? I want to so badly!" Your counselor will reassure you that he knows how well you think, and how hard you've worked to balance the needs in your family.

Another example: perhaps you want to try to work through your feelings of shyness, but can't think how to do it. You ask your counselor to help. He might ask you the question, "Was there ever a time in your life when you weren't shy?" You may remember standing up on the first day of first grade, and saying your name proudly to the teacher when she asked, and then hearing other children laugh. After you tell him this story, both of you decide that you should try announcing your name proudly, like you did then, with a little fanfare. This makes you laugh as you do it a number of times. Then some tears follow as you remember your father telling stories of how people ridiculed him because of his name. (It's important to note that many of the hurts we carry have an ethnic, racial, or religious history to them. Oppression has touched all our lives, and its effects on us are quite personal, and quite deep.) Your request for help has led to a good question from your counselor, which led to the start of the healing process for you.

Let your counselor know what he does well as listener.

Your counselor is learning to support you as quickly and thoroughly as he can. Your appreciation of him will speed his learning and

encourage him to think with precision. For instance, you might tell him, “It was so hard for me to think of why I might be shy, but you asked just the right question. And you were so supportive when I told you that people have made fun of our family name. I could see that you cared when I talked about my father being called names—that was what really got me crying. I feel so much better.” You gave him very specific information that he can use again to help you work through those hurts and others like them.

How to Set Up a Listening Time

Now we can get down to the practical details of conducting listening partnerships.

Session times.

These are to be determined by you and your listening partner. Decide how much time you will take in total, and divide it equally. The counselor should keep time, or set a timer, so that both partners get equal turns. We suggest that partners try to do forty-five minutes to an hour each way for the first many listening times, because safety builds with time. If turns are too short, not enough safety builds to successfully use the healing process.

Session frequency.

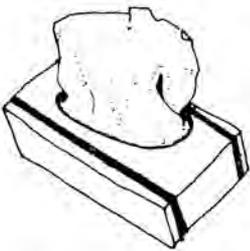
We strongly suggest sessions once a week, if possible. Less frequent sessions will leave you less familiar with the flow of each other’s lives. It will also be more difficult for both you and your listening partner to concentrate on key issues, because you have so many major events competing for your attention. In addition to a weekly session, you may decide to try short listening times over the phone at agreed-upon times, so that each partner can address any pressing issues at least briefly before new ones appear. Parents can also make agreements to call each other when one of them is at the end of her rope; after five or ten minutes, the parent who called should give time back to her counselor, to keep a dependency from forming.

Session locations.

Again, the arrangements are up to you and your partner. It's best to choose a place where you won't be interrupted. Pick a relatively tidy, private, and pleasant place. You and your listening partner should be able to sit comfortably close and in easy view of each other. Sometimes, a client will relax and laugh or cry more easily while lying down, with the counselor seated next to her. Between you, figure out a good, safe place. During the session, take the phone off the hook and take whatever other precautions are necessary to ensure that you won't be interrupted.

Session preparation.

Your attention for your own issues and the issues of your partner must be good, so that the session will be worth your time and effort. All mind-altering drugs, including nicotine, alcohol, and caffeine, reduce a person's ability to attend to matters at hand, and to use the healing process. Nicotine and caffeine distance people from the healing process by making it difficult to make relaxed connections with people, and by driving feelings underground. Alcohol interrupts the process of reclaiming intelligence that was bound up in hurt: laughter and tears under the influence of alcohol do not result in more intelligent choices or more flexible behavior. All psychoactive drugs also seriously affect the counselor's ability to pay attention to the client. So, in preparation for a session, make sure you are free from the effects of these and other psychoactive substances.



Equipment.

You'll need cushions or pillows to make yourselves comfortable, and a box of tissues for obvious reasons. A timepiece will also be necessary.

Structure.

Over the years, we have found that productive listening exchanges have an informal structure which you may want to adopt:

- **The client talks about what is going well.**

The client talks about recent joys and successes. This is a good way to begin to orient the client's attention toward herself, without getting into large, murky topics too fast. The attention on the positive tends to remind the client of her power and goodness, reminders which help keep her from feeling overwhelmed by the difficulties she may talk about later in the session.

- **The client reviews minor upsets.**

This is a good time to clean house mentally. The client reviews the smaller things that nibble at her pleasure in life. Talking about them allows her to sort them through and either use the healing process to release the tension she carries, or put them away so that more important things can be addressed.

- **The client works on the key issue.**

The client talks about and works on the issue she has raised.

- **The counselor brings the client's attention back to the present.**

This is an interesting and enjoyable part of a session. About five minutes before the client's time is up, the counselor should let the client know that her time is nearly over, and help her bring her attention away from feelings of hurt. To shift her focus, the counselor can think of little questions or tasks that involve pleasant or neutral topics. For instance, the counselor may ask random questions such as "What are the names of four streets near your apartment?" or "What are three kinds of animals that have names beginning with the letter 'S'?" or "Spell your name backward, then spell my name backward." If the client has been crying or trembling heavily, it may take the full five minutes to get her attention focused again on her present surroundings. It may be a good idea to have the client get up, walk around, get a drink of water, jump up and down, help you water a dry plant, and the like, until she looks like she's alert and ready to pay attention to you or to her trip home.

Focusing a client's attention on light, pleasant topics is a good tactic to use any time your client has been talking about difficulties in a repetitive tone, with no sign that she is close to laughter, tears, or trembling. Sometimes, as you encourage her to think about happy times in her life, the contrast between happy memories and her present feelings of upset is just what is needed to help her begin to use the healing process. Most of us can't work through our worst feelings without being conscious of some ray of hope to beckon us forward. Pleasant topics, such as "Do you remember the last time someone pulled the covers up over you just as you were falling asleep?" or "When was the last surprise phone call you got from an old friend?" or "When was the last time you had fun staying up past midnight?" will provide a helpful contrast to the feelings of difficulty that may overwhelm your client at times.

- **The client and counselor exchange appreciation.**

It is very important for listening partners to openly appreciate each other and each other's efforts. The end of a listening time is a good time to let your partner know what you liked about his listening, and what you like about him.

This should be plenty of information for you to experiment with as you build an effective listening partnership. If, for reasons that you can't untangle, you need to back out of a listening partnership because it doesn't seem to be going well, don't give up on constructing this kind of relationship. Simply try again with someone else, applying what you have learned so far.



More About Effective Listening

The Fifth Principle of Effective Listening

As counselor, you have listened to your client's difficulties. You have developed a sense of the great efforts she has made to love and to persist in spite of these difficulties. By now, your client has probably been able to talk extensively about her life and to sometimes reach the sense of safety needed for the healing process to begin. However, there probably have been times when she has been full of feelings about a difficulty, but has not been able to laugh, cry, or tremble. The healing process simply would not start, in spite of your patience and caring.

At times like these, you will need to understand a fifth principle of effective listening. We have addressed the first four: respect your listening partner and the power of your own attention; pay attention to your client's issues, not your own; identify the issue your client has chosen to work on; and help her release the emotional tension attached to that issue. A fifth principle will help you and your listening partner unlock the healing process when talking and basic support do not bring tears, laughter, trembling, tantrums, or yawns. This is the fifth principle of effective listening:

Counter the feeling or behavior left by the hurt.

Think of yourself as actively unbuckling the bad feeling or rigid behavior from your client, so she can shake it off. To unbuckle a hurt, you counter it. If the client tells a story of discouragement, you indicate that there is hope. While she works on an incident of rejection, your presence and approval will provide fresh evidence of her worth. If she talks about feeling confused, you let her know that you're sure she can figure things out. You encourage her to talk about the early roots of her present-day tensions, so she remembers that her troubles come from times she was hurt, not from personal defects. *You offer the client the perspective that she is a good and capable person who can get out from under any difficulty that has befallen her.* The trust that has been built by your good listening, together with this very precise support, will allow her to unload

the hurt she has been carrying. She will be able to shed the bad feelings that have confused her. As a result, she will be able to use her own power and ability more fully.

Here are some of the basic ways you can actively help your client shake off the hurt she has become accustomed to:

- **Appreciate the client.**

If she is talking about how exhausted she is, tell her that you know how much she deserves a rest. If her exhaustion brings discouraged thoughts with it, let her know that you think she's doing an excellent job at a difficult time. If a father has been working too hard and feels distant from his family, let him know you're sure he has been caring for them in the best way he knows how. Relaxed appreciation will contradict a client's tendency to constantly nag at herself. It calls into question her assumptions about her own limitations.

- **Reassure her.**

Reassurance works when it's a simple but heartfelt reminder about the basic goodness of people. If a father feels like a failure because his son is often angry at him, reassure him that children love their parents passionately, and that, over time, he can find ways to get close to his son again. Reassuring parents that they love their children, that their children love them, and that they've always done their best to be good parents helps to counter the pervasive feelings of guilt and failure that most parents carry.

- **Encourage her to take full pride in herself.**

When a parent looks pleased, stands proudly, and speaks proudly about herself and her children, feelings can immediately bubble up for release, often beginning with laughter. Openly taking pride is a big contrast to the inner put-downs that we listen to in our minds all day. Be warned that the parent will not feel comfortable praising herself. She is used to acting in accordance with hurt feelings (that might tell her, for example, that she's not important,

is not doing a good job, or is too high-strung to be a good mother). But as she tries to say with a pleased expression “I’m a relaxed, loving mom,” laughter and tears are likely to begin. The rigid perception of herself that she carries is on its way out, because you’ve encouraged her to actively chase it out of her behavior for a moment.



- **Encourage her to be physically active.**

Our upsets tend to rob us of our vigor. We sit at home and feel blue, or stand quietly on the edge of the school parent meeting, hoping no one will notice how unsure we feel in a group. In a session, when a parent has brought up what she is afraid of, it’s a good time to encourage her to fight her fears with physical activity. If she’s talking about how shy she feels at school parent meetings, ask her to stand up, spread her arms wide, and say eagerly “Hi, everybody! Here I am!” This may seem a little silly, until you remember how enthusiastically two-year-olds present themselves. They assume that people will delight in their every step, their every little experiment. You are modeling the joyful confidence that your client must once have had. If a father is talking about how depressed he gets about his angry son, ask him to grab your shoulders and give you a shake, as if you were his son, saying whatever he would like to say from his heart. You want him to

actively show his upset, and the deep caring behind it. You are not training the parent to be loud and aggressive with others. You are not giving indirect pieces of advice about how to handle real-life situations. You are simply getting the parent moving, to counter the passivity that goes along with feeling sad or afraid. Often, parents will laugh, perspire and tremble as you get them moving in ways their rigid behavior doesn't usually allow. Your aim is to encourage the release of emotional tension, so that your client can more freely choose her responses in the future.

- **Encourage her to model power and to tackle the problem situation.**

Perhaps a parent is talking about a subtle but definite way she is stereotyped by a teacher in her child's school because of her race. She tells you that she is unsure, but she thinks the teacher might be slighting her because she is a Latina. Ask her to make a bold, proud statement, look straight at you, and "talk to" this teacher. You might tell her to say "I am a Latina. It's great to be a Latina! I am a smart, loving mother. Treat me with respect!" As she tries to hold herself with pride, the heavy hurt of racism will begin to loosen with tears, trembling and perhaps some angry words and motions. Your client may begin to come up with an increasing variety of proud statements as she gets a taste of freedom from this hurt. If not, you must keep making up proud statements and powerful actions for her to try. She may cry heavily while you model pride. This is very constructive, and there's no need to hurry her to act powerfully. Her tears will gradually allow her confidence to return. Meanwhile, you can provide the model of power with which she can chase down the fear and grief that have burdened her for so long.

- **Encourage her to counter the feeling, put-down or rigid behavior that she has been saddled with.**

When a client tells you about hurt feelings or rigid behavior and no laughter, tears, or trembling are apparent, you can suggest that she try out a more loving, confident, powerful behavior. If she is furious at her teenage daughter, you might direct her to

talk about the thoughts and the words of love she used when her daughter was a baby, and to imagine speaking to her daughter in that vein. If a father is deeply worried about being reunited with a daughter he hasn't seen in three years, you might ask him to say to you "Celia loves me, and I love her. We'll figure this out."

You are not trying to get the parent to sugar-coat the real problem she has. You are asking her to model love, hope, and confidence for a moment or two, in order to flush out the feelings of disappointment, discouragement, and worry that burden her. The uncomfortable contrast between the direction you give and the feelings the parent has is constructive. The discomfort often means that crying, trembling, or uneasy but healing laughter is on its way. You are free to offer a direction such as "Things are going to turn out OK" even though you don't know exactly what will happen, because you are taking a long-range perspective. Every difficulty a parent meets is also an opportunity to learn. Persistent difficulties mean consistent opportunities to get things right, especially when a parent has listening resource and the healing process to help her. You can direct the parent toward a hopeful attitude, then listen to the tears and trembling that bubble up because her hopelessness feels convincing. She will make steady progress toward more effective and more creative solutions.

This direction to act with confidence and power can be very uncomfortable for a client to try. It goes directly against the grain of a heavy set of feelings. It works like a shovel on packed soil. The bad feelings are packed down tightly. Talking about them has not released them. The direction you offer toward love, caring, confidence, and even playfulness digs down and loosens up particularly heavy feelings of hopelessness, fear, and isolation. After your client has tried your direction, help her notice where her voice was less than confident, or her tone mocking instead of loving. Let her tell you the details of why she can't possibly sound loving when she is so mad. It's these details, contrasted with your expectation that she *could* feel or act differently, that will bring feelings up sharply enough to begin the healing process.

As counselor, your aim is not to help the parent feel better. Feelings are not a dependable guide to action, nor are they of utmost importance in the larger scheme of things. Your aim is to listen, provide respect, and to help the client unleash her full intelligence. As she uses your attention to battle her difficulties, she is going to feel lousy at times. She will decide to face times that she was hurt, and in the healing process, she will feel that grief, desperation, and fear again. The difference will be that she is now safe with a friend who can listen, and can do what should have been done long ago. She is cherished and supported. The feelings are painful, but the real situation couldn't be better. Although your client will not always feel better during or right after a listening time, she will be able to take fuller charge of her life. Her intelligence will prevail more often over the pull of hurt reactions.

Don't worry if this idea of countering the hurt seems foreign to you. Try it in your own sessions as client, and try to use it as counselor. You will learn best from your own experiments. Please remember, too, that none of the above suggestions will work well without your basic ability to listen and genuinely care about your client. Concentrate on listening and caring first. The fancier footwork will be a rich addition to the respect and trust you have built with your listening partner.

Solving Problems as Client

As a listening partnership becomes safer, we sometimes bring up feelings for examination and healing in an interesting way. We attach them to the best listener we know, our listening partner. The situation can be handled within the listening sessions, if awareness is brought to it.

Be aware of feelings that attach to your counselor.

If you develop strong feelings about your counselor, either positive or negative, check to see who he or she reminds you of. For instance, perhaps a listening partnership begins well for both of you. After three months or so of increasingly productive listening times, you begin to get very irritated with your listening partner

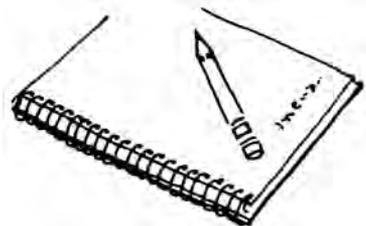
because although he uses the healing process well, he almost never looks at you during his turn as client. It's time to think about this situation for a moment. He is crying and trembling and laughing with increasing regularity, so it is clear that he doesn't need to look at you to feel your support. In this case, the important question is: "Why do you 'need' him to look at you?"

We have found that a counselor will often begin to "resemble" a specific person in the client's life when the client is ready to work on her feelings about this person. In the above example, perhaps your listening partner is beginning to "resemble" your father, who often did not look you in the eye. Your feelings of irritation have roots in an important hurt. It's not appropriate to tell your listening partner to change the way he uses his time as client, to make you feel better. Instead, during your time as client, tell your counselor that you've got him identified with your father. List all the ways in which your counselor reminds you of your father. Details of voice, facial features, posture, gestures and the like are all important to name in this review. Then, name all the specific differences you can think of, to bring awareness to the fact that these are indeed two quite different people. Finally, begin talking about your father, and your feelings about him. Do not try to work on your feelings by acting as if your partner were wrong in his behavior.

Another common problem for listening partners is keeping track of the learning they do in their most productive sessions. Here is a solution we have found to work.

Keep a notebook on what works for you as client.

One of the curious powers of emotional hurts is the power to make us forget how to heal from them. A client can have a rip-roaring session, full of tears and trembling, and two days later, not be able to remember anything about how she got to those feelings or even what they were. This happens more frequently with especially heavy incidents of hurt. A notebook will



help you preserve what you learn from your time as client. Write down memories that bring tears or laughter. Note directions or reassurances from your counselor that are effective in getting the healing process started or in intensifying it. Your life as a parent has many surprises and complications that demand your attention. Your notebook will ensure that you don't have to spend half your time as client trying to remember what it is you want to work on, and how your counselor can help.

Nurturing a Listening Partnership

Once you have begun your listening partnership, you will want to care for it well. A good listener, willing to think carefully about you and your life, is a very precious resource. These are guidelines gleaned from years of experience with listening partnerships. Give them careful consideration.

Be courteous at all times.

Common courtesy is the way to keep your listening partnership clear of distractions and unnecessary issues. Parents have enough issues to deal with, without having to work on the irritation of a listening partner who doesn't call to tell you she's ill until ten minutes before your expected listening exchange. Be on time, follow through on your commitments, and trade off so that you take turns having the longer commute or the more complicated arrangements for child care. When your partner comes to your house, have the room you'll use as tidy as possible. Greet her warmly, and part with appreciation and affection for her. These simple courtesies do a lot to keep a partnership strong.

Keep the partnership separate from other relationships you may have with your listening partner.

If your listening partner is also an established friend of yours, be very careful not to give advice or offer practical assistance in her session. This is a separate relationship, one in which you are helping her to think and to use the healing process. When you are client, don't ask for practical help during your listening time. ("Who do

you think is the best children's doctor in town? Ours is retiring soon.") When you are counselor, parry any requests for practical help, so that you and your client can get back on track. ("Let's talk about doctors later. What were you saying about how sullen Jenny was last night?") You also must be careful to keep track of what you are told in listening time, so that you can respect your client's need for confidentiality.

Commit yourself to preserving the confidentiality of your partner's session.

There is no faster way to ruin a good listening partnership than to breach the confidentiality that your client is trusting you to keep. *What a parent discusses in her session is not to be referred to again, either in your listening time, afterwards, or in any social situation, including conversations with your partner, relatives, or children.* Without this guarantee of confidentiality, a parent can never be sure who will hear about her struggles and her uncensored thoughts. All parents need a safe haven, where it is OK not to have all the answers, OK to be upset and show it, OK to show that they need help sometimes. Parents also need to know that letting down their guard in order to improve their ability to think and solve problems will not be held against them. Confidentiality is the way we set up this safe haven. You must make a commitment to safeguard your client in this way, and keep it.

If your listening partner begins to casually discuss what you talked about during listening time (for example, "You know, my son is just like yours! He's got such a mess in his room . . ."), kindly but quickly interrupt with a firm reminder. You might say, "Excuse me, but I was talking about my son in my listening time. I don't want to discuss him now." After a few slipups, you and your listening partner will learn not to talk about what you hear in listening time as if it were appropriate for casual conversation.

If the story your client told you in her turn was so distressing to you that it preoccupies you, you'll need to find another listener, and carefully talk about what is troubling you, so that you can find

the emotional release that will clear your thoughts again. Work on what distressed you anonymously. For instance, “I heard a story today that really upset me. I can’t tell you the details, but I feel so sorry for adults who were abused as children. I just think of how innocent this person was, and I feel so sad . . .”

Appreciate your listening partner often and in varied ways.

Let her know you like her. Let her know what you admire about her. Give her a playful nudge now and then. Nothing elaborate is necessary. Simple human kindness and affection will bring your partnership increased safety.

Protecting the Special Nature of the Listening Partnership

Keep the goal of the partnership clear.

If you have met your listening partner at a parent resource group, or do not have a previously established friendship with her, keep the relationship confined to a listening partnership. Your goal is to help your partner unleash his or her full intelligence, using the tool of listening.

We have found that because we set up a listening partnership to be automatically safe, with each person receiving very special and direct attention, a confusing thing can sometimes happen. People who have met as listening partners will sometimes fall in love with each other. Or they may feel pulled to depend on each other in specific ways (such as for child care, or for medical advice, or for an entrée into an attractive social group). This happens because of the built-in safety of this structured relationship. You have met a

person who consistently approves of you, and who is kind to you when you feel very upset. It's easy to see how the unfilled hopes of your childhood, or the unmet goals in your present life, could come galloping forward as urgent feelings of need attached to the best listener you've ever had.

Our experience strongly suggests that if you feel you want to fill your social and personal needs by spending more time with your listening partner, you have brought up a set of feelings that are ready to be talked about and addressed by using the healing process. Yes, it may finally be time for you, a single mother, to find a man friend you feel safe with. Cry about your longings with your listening partner, and with your increasing confidence, teach the men you date how to listen to you well. But don't try to turn a listening partnership into a romance. It won't work.

It won't work because the quality of listening and reassurance that you are getting from your listening partner has led you to hope and expect that a wider relationship with him will yield more attention of this high quality. Your expectations won't be met. No one can provide one-way attention all the time. The safety you have in the partnership is best used to address feelings, so that you can make the rest of your life what you want it to be. To lean on the partnership to make your life easy, socially acceptable, or less lonely, is to sidestep the important opportunity for growth that has appeared. So cry hard about what you want and how badly you want it. Use your listening partnership to heal your long-standing feelings of need. With strength, persistence, and the support of your listening partner, set out to reach your goals and build, from the foundations on up, friendships that will enrich your life.

An Overview of Effective Counseling on Parents' Issues

Help Parents to Respect Themselves and Their Work

We parents love our children deeply, are committed to them, and want their lives to be good. This is the underlying assumption that a good counselor of parents adopts as he looks for ways to acknowledge this caring.

It is important that parents be reminded that the job of parenting cannot be done perfectly. We simply don't have the information, the control of our environment, and the help we need to do everything right. We do have a far more important capability. *We can set out to treasure and enjoy our children, and to take pride in ourselves as mothers and fathers.* This direction will lead us away from our dissatisfaction with ourselves, and toward making friends and building caring networks around our families. The regrets we have because we haven't been able to parent perfectly need to be talked and cried about, so that regret won't keep us from noticing the many things we do well, and the many strengths our children have.

Help parents show how much they care.

We parents don't often speak of our deep love for our children with our listening partners, co-workers or friends. If children are referred to, it is often in the context of our upsets and confusions, rather than in the context of delight. Hence, our non-parent friends and co-workers get a lopsided view of our relationships with our children. They hear all of the troubles, and none of the joys. This can keep them standing at arm's length, not wanting to get to know us and our families better. With a counselor's encouragement, we need to try to openly show our pleasure and pride in our children, laughing through any embarrassment we may have about wearing our hearts on our sleeves. Our goal here is to develop the ability to show others our love for our families. This opens the door for people outside our families to feel welcome, interested in us, and glad to be a part of our lives.

Counter the effects of the oppression of parents.

Parents are oppressed in our society. We do the complex, invaluable work of nurturing the next generation of children, but receive no preparation, pay or protection from overwork as we make this significant contribution. Because this work we do is neglected, we parents find ourselves at a grave economic disadvantage. Whether our families face poverty directly or simply fear it, most parents experience a particular emotional backlash which comes from nurturing children without sufficient support. We feel guilty about the moments that don't go well for them. We feel confused about how to nurture them and help them solve their problems. We feel isolated from others, and try harder and harder to figure things out by ourselves. And we feel exhausted, a result of the twenty-four-hour-a-day responsibility we carry and the frequent eighteen-hour work days we put in, just to keep our heads above water.



Here are brief directions that may help you get the healing process started when one of these feelings is your key issue:

- **Guilt.**

A basic direction against the weight of parental guilt is something like “I am a good mother/father. I love my child/ren. And [said

lightly!], I have a few small regrets!” The counselor needs to listen fully to the parent’s regrets. We do need to cry hard about the things that haven’t gone well between us and our children, so that we can enjoy them and ourselves again.

- **Confusion.**

When a parent doesn’t know what to do (which might easily be twenty times a day), the situation becomes charged with heavy feelings of grief, fear, and frustration. We care so much, but we have so little good information to help us get our caring across to our children. *Your job as counselor is not to solve the problem for the parent, but to help her heal from the feelings that keep her from thinking and functioning well.*

To untangle a difficulty between a parent and child, it’s often helpful to ask the parent to talk about the child’s conception, birth, and early months, and all the feelings that surfaced then. These are the times when our hopes and commitments toward our children form, and when we get our first direct taste of the isolation and oppression of parents. Our current troubles with our children are often rooted in these early times.

Another fruitful tactic is to ask the parent about her own childhood. Our children often remind us of our own unresolved childhood issues. Ask the parent what things were like for her as a child, when she was as old as the child she’s having difficulty with. If she had acted, in her family, the way her child now acts, what would have happened to her? Or you might ask her if she is trying to protect her child from a difficulty she had in *her* childhood.

A third direction is to ask the parent what gets in her way of approaching her child with closeness and warmth when her child goes off track. What prevents her from moving *toward* her troubled child? What keeps her from being proud of her child, in spite of his difficulty? What is she afraid of? These questions, which pose

the possibility of showing love and support in spite of hard times, help the parent flush out the hurt feelings that stand in her way of thinking more rationally when her child is asking for help.

Hand in Hand publishes several booklets on using the tools of listening to help children undo the effects of hurt on their lives. These may provide information the parent can use in her attempt to support her child well.

- **Isolation.**

A direction against the isolation of parenting is to do something about it. Ask the parent what is in her way of making close friends, having fun, and learning to trust others. Parents need lots of encouragement to think afresh and try anew to make friends and arrange the help they need so badly. Before we had children, making friends wasn't all that easy for many of us, but we had spare time to devote to the project. Now, old feelings of discouragement gain easy entry into our lives, because we are working far harder, and tackling sizable difficulties. Parents need listening time to work through feelings of shyness, discouragement, anger, mistrust, and more. They also need some time to set goals toward increasing their contact with other parents, friends, and helpers, to ease the strain of isolation.

- **Exhaustion.**

The exhausted parent needs a warm, accepting, non-demanding counselor to stand guard while she lets all her weariness show. The counselor should allow the parent to let go of every responsibility, including the responsibility to use the listening time productively, in order to counter the loneliness and the constant downcast trudge that is the hallmark of exhaustion. Often, the parent has been struck by exhaustion before, either during illness or during a particularly terrifying early hurt. As counselor, be on the lookout for indications of what the roots of her present-day feelings might be.

Build alliances with other parents.

Our alliances with other parents can be very important to us. Other parents understand. Other parents care deeply. Other parents are fighting the same battles we are for good schooling, good medical care, fair treatment in the workplace, and good neighborhoods in which to live. However, we often discount other parents as possible friends because they look so tired, or because of particular ways they act. Often, when we examine our attitudes toward the other parents we know, we find that we have unwittingly transferred basic feelings about our own mothers and fathers onto them. For instance, perhaps a mother desperately needs child care for her two-year-old, but feels mistrustful of the mother next door who has offered to help. When she thinks about the basis of her fears, she is reminded that her own mother died when she was six, and discovers that she is afraid to “abandon” her child to anyone else’s care, based on her own unresolved feelings, and not on the qualifications of the mother next door. As we move to build better support for ourselves and our families, and better communities for all young people, a good look at the assumptions we make about other parents we don’t want to trust is in order.

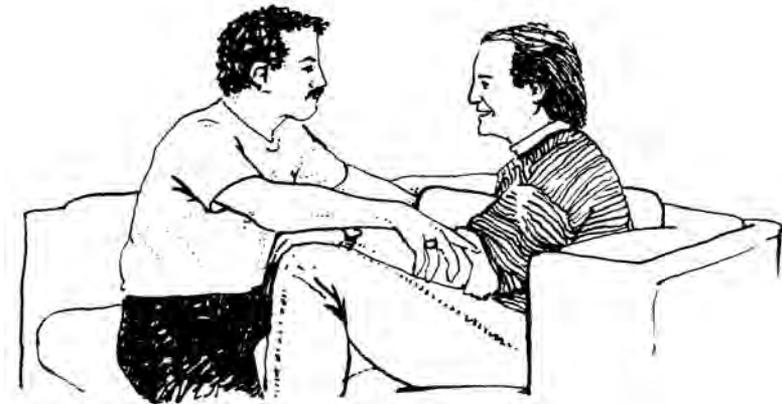
Recognize that every family is different.

There are no norms for a good family. Good families come in all sizes, from all backgrounds, and have every possible combination of responsible adults and nurtured children. Good families all have stormy times and crises. Good families all need help and support. Whether you form a family of two or of ten, you’ve formed a group of people unlike any other. No prescribed rule or custom will exactly fit the needs of that family: it is as unique as each of the people in it. Our lives as parents become easier (although perhaps harder to explain) when we follow our best judgement rather than try to live up to the expectations of others or the norms of the culture. It’s OK to let your children shout out the car window for fun on a summer afternoon. It’s OK not to serve a hot meal at suppertime, in spite of

centuries of tradition. It's OK to think for yourself, to experiment, to do what lets the people in your family breathe easier and stay close to one another, even when it's not what you think other families do. We parents can be help each other by encouraging each other to make love work for the people in our families, whether we're following tradition or not. Every family is different, and will always be different.

Welcome fathers as primary parents.

A final important direction is for both mothers and fathers to encourage fathers to participate fully and proudly in the lives of their children. Fathers in our society have been seen as providers rather than as nurturers, as secondary parents in comparison to the primary role of the mother. To free mothers and fathers of their stereotyped roles in childrearing is in everyone's best interest. Our children love their daddies as much as their mommies, and they want close relationships with both. Both fathers and mothers make mistakes with their children. Both fathers and mothers lack information at times. Because fathers have traditionally been driven to the outskirts of parenting, they need special encouragement to jump in and enjoy learning every detail about building good relationships with children. Fathers belong close to their children and close to the joys and challenges of nurturing them well.



A Final Word

Remember That Our Work Is Important

The work we parents do is some of the most interesting and rewarding work the world can offer. Our children remind us that joy, fun, enthusiasm and determination to get things right are our birthright, too. It's time to turn our attention toward the enjoyment of our children and our parenting. It's time to get down to the business of building networks of caring relationships, in which we and our families can thrive. It's time to work with other parents to build a society that is committed to the support of parents and young people. It's time to build a society that will allow no child to be raised in poverty, no child to be the target of racism, no parent to be heartbroken because he or she lacks the resource needed to parent well. And it's important not to do this vital work alone.



Our Mission

Hand in Hand improves the lives of parents and children by nurturing the parent-child connection. To learn more about the *Parenting by Connection* approach and *Listening Tools* for parents and professionals, contact:

For further information, contact:

Hand in Hand

P.O. Box 1279

Palo Alto, CA 94302

650 322-5323

www.handinhandparenting.org

Copyright © 2006 **Hand in Hand**

Illustrations by Maggie Conroy

Literature List

The *Listening Tools* employed in the *Parenting by Connection* approach are fully described in the following **Hand in Hand** literature:

Items marked * are available in Spanish

Booklets

- * *Parenting by Connection*
- * *Listening: A Tool for Caring Parents*
- * *Listening to Children: Seven-booklet set includes How Children's Emotions Work, Special Time, Playlistening, Crying, Tantrums and Indignation, Healing Children's Fears, and Reaching for Your Angry Child*
(also available in Chinese and Japanese)
- * *Setting Limits with Children*
- * *Supporting Adolescents*
- * *Listening to Parents: Listening Partnerships for Parents*
- * *Listening to Parents: Leading a Parent Resource Group*

Audio

- Listening to Children: Audio version of the six-booklet set above*
(on CD)
- * *Cómo Fijar Límites a Nuestros Niños: Spanish audio version of Setting Limits with Children* (on audiotape)

Videotapes

- Setting Limits with Children, 61 minutes*
- Playlistening, 39 minutes*

All are by Patty Wipfler, and can be purchased online at www.handinhandparenting.org or by calling **Hand in Hand** at 650 322-5323.