



GriefConnections

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The Essential Listening Skills in Grief Counseling

William G. Hoy

Nearly 20 years ago now, Dr. Jim Kok, a southern California colleague of mine wrote a book entitled *90% of Helping is Just Showing Up*. I've always been intrigued by Jim's title because in a very important sense, the most important work we do in caring for bereaved people is just that: *showing up!*

The gift of presence is huge. Most bereaved people, interviewed a few weeks after the death of their loved person, report that they barely remember the words that were spoken at the funeral or even recall the "dumb things" well-meaning friends said in those early hours and days. What they don't seem to ever forget, however, is that people came and kept coming.

But after the gift of our presence, perhaps the most important gift we offer is the gift of a listening ear. There are many sub-skills that are part of this listening presence but these four seem paramount:

Paraphrase (or Restate) What You Heard. After hearing a client speak for a minute or two, simply restate what you think you heard in your own words. Try to include the two or three points that seemed most important in what the client said. This phrase will help you start: "John, what I believe I hear you saying is that you feel sad most of the time but that these waves come over you especially strong in the evenings and on Sundays. . ." A basic skill new counselors learn, paraphrasing helps the client know he or she was heard and understood. This feedback is paramount, especially in an era where texting and email has replaced much of our everyday verbal conversation.

Reflect on Observations. Listen for "tone" and watch for facial expressions to give you a clue about the emotional content of what your client is sharing. If your client's vocal pitch rises and she becomes red-faced in telling you how the doctor missed the cancer diagnosis, listen patiently. Without over-stating the obvious, you can say, "Marge, I can tell this has really made you angry. . ." or "Marge, it sounds like you're feeling pretty angry about all of this. . ." Effective use of this skill helps the client realize you not only hear her words but you also "get" the meaning behind those words.

Clarify Your Understanding. Do you remember the kindergarten game where kids sit in a circle, the teacher whispers a simple sentence in the ear of the first and the message gets quietly passed along from one to another around the circle? By the time the entire group has passed along the message, it often bears little resemblance to what was really said at the beginning. Similarly, every family counselor has taken time in

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session to help husbands and wives really listen to each other and clarify understanding. More often than not, the listener misses an important part of the speaker's communication.

We don't always hear what we think we hear, so clarifying is an especially important listening skill, even for professional counselors. After paraphrasing, stop occasionally to make sure you've gotten the story straight. Simply say, "I think I heard you say. . .Do I have that right? Have I missed something important?"

Don't forget to invite additional information to help you understand what you think you heard. A simple request to, "Tell me more about that. . ." often helps us check our perceptions and assures that we have the story straight.

Communicate with Your Body. Actually, what this should say is "*Watch* your body language" because our bodies are always talking, whether we acknowledge their communication, or not! As an experienced counselor, I need reminders periodically that my body language is communicating a message whether or not it's the message I *think* it is communicating. Ask a colleague, friend, or mate to critique your body language as you speak.

Simple techniques bear repeating, even for those of us who have been counseling many years. Move forward in your chair to decrease distance between you and your client. Keep your arms unfolded. Gesture with open hands and palms out rather than with closed fists. Smile warmly—but avoid the syrupy, pasted-on kind of smile. Make good eye contact but don't stare. Nod your head in agreement and acknowledgement of your client's story.

Grief counseling and support depend most directly on the client being able to tell his story to a willing listener. We become a vital aid to grief's resolution when we are able to patiently hear the story and clarify its details by listening attentively.

The Author: William G. (Bill) Hoy is an educator and counselor specializing in death, bereavement, and end-of-life issues. In addition to walking through significant losses of his own, Dr. Hoy has counseled grieving individuals and families for more than 25 years. He is the author of *Guiding People through Grief* and *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved*. His newest book, *Called to Care: Navigating a Life of Care for Others* will be published later this year. He teaches in the graduate program in bereavement at Marian University and oversees the counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice.

Library Notes



The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships. Nichols, M.P. (2009). New York: Guilford.

In this exceedingly practical book on developing good listening skills, psychologist Michael Nichols lays out a clear plan for increasing our ability to listen to one another. In his introduction, Nichols writes, "We've gained unparalleled access to information and lost something very important. We've lost the habit of concentrating our attention." And that kind of attention concentration is what Nichols says is the most important key to really listening well.

Most of us in the counseling profession have a deep and abiding suspicion that many—if not most—of our

clients turn to us, at least in large part, because they have no one else in their lives who will truly, deeply listen to them. But sometimes, we fall prey to the same influences that our counselees' friends and family members do. Distractibility prevents real listening.

This book was not written primarily for an audience of professional listeners. But that being said, most of us would do well to review the principles Nichols holds out so that we can better practice the fine art of true listening.

Upcoming Loss of a Spouse Support Group

A local support group will be meeting for those experiencing grief as a result of losing their spouse. They will be meeting at Victory Highway Wesleyan Church, 150 Victory Highway, Painted Post.

Sandi Follette, director of the Grief Center of the Southern Tier and certified Bereavement Counselor, will be leading the group.

The support group is focused on building relationships with others who have experienced a similar loss. Sandi teaches how to balance grief while learning to live without your loved one. The weekly meeting is very informal which promotes openness and sharing in the grieving process. While the group openly shares, Sandi provides resources to promote healing. There is no charge associated with joining the support group.

For more information on being part of the Loss of a Spouse Support Group as well as the date/time of the first meeting, please contact Sandi Follette at 607-936-9077.



Inservice Programs for Your Organization

Did you know that we can provide an inservice speaker for your organization? Whether you are looking for a group presentation on some aspect of grief counseling or a program on today's funeral options, we have an excellent group of speakers ready to respond. To talk about options for a workshop in your organization, please call Phillips Funeral Home at 607-936-9212 or email info@phillipsfuneralhome.com.

Email Encouragement

An organization called GriefShare supplies daily emails of encouragement for those who are grieving. To find out more and to sign up for the daily email encouragement go to www.dailyemails.griefshare.org/dailyemails.

Memorial Quote

And can it be that in a world so full and busy, the loss of one weak creature makes a void in any heart, so wide and deep that nothing but the width and depth of eternity can fill it up!

Charles Dickens

Out of the Darkness Suicide Prevention Walk



The 3rd annual Out of the Darkness Suicide Prevention walk will be held at Craig Park in Painted Post on Saturday, September 10th. The Walk is sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). Sandi Follette, executive director of the Grief Center of the Southern Tier is leading the event. Registration will be from 8:30-10 a.m. with the walk following registration. A short program will follow.

The event is open to the public. If you would like more information, you can go to www.outofthedarkness.org. On the center of the page click on the link "to find an event near you". Those looking for more information can also contact Sandi Follette at 607-936-9077.

Support Groups

Loss of a Spouse Support Group

Group meets at Victory Highway Wesleyan Church, 150 Victory Highway, Painted Post. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at the Grief Center of The Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Loss of a Loved One to Suicide

First and third Thursdays of each month at 7 pm at the Hand in Hand Methodist Church on Wardell Street, Elmira. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at The Grief Center of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Compassionate Friends Support Group

Last Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, 2872 Westinghouse Road, Horseheads. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Joann at 562-8090 or by email at jmorgan55@stny.rr.com.

Abortion

Forgiven and Set Free—a post-abortion class. For more information contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

Infant Loss

The SHARE Infant Loss Bereavement Support Group meets the third Thursday of every month at 7 pm in the Clute Education Building at Arnot Ogden Medical Center and is for parents, grandparents, family and friends of persons who have lost children through miscarriage or stillbirth. Contact Maryanne Amisano at 607-562-8856 for more information.

For more local support groups go to www.phillipsfuneralhome.com.

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