

How to Have Difficult Conversations

Supporting Handout for Workshop: #1 Listening Skills

The Methodist Church

Positive
Working Together



Active Listening

Active listening is listening carefully and accurately when another person is speaking to us. It is much more difficult, and takes more effort and energy, than many of us realise.

Non-verbal listening skills include:

- Adequate eye contact, which doesn't mean staring hard at another person! Gently shift your gaze from the person's face to another body part (such as a gesturing hand or tapping foot) and then back to the face. Occasionally move your gaze away from the person, but not for long periods of time. Be natural.
- Non-verbal prompts, such as a nodding head, appropriate facial gestures and strategic silences. Silence, whilst sometimes uncomfortable, can allow someone space to reflect on what has been said or how they feel.
- Encouraging body language, for instance unfolded arms, shows openness and receptivity. Relax your own body and try to sit facing the speaker, leaning forward slightly without invading their personal space.

Verbal listening skills include:

- Encouraging: "Tell me more..."
- Acknowledging: "I see..."
- Checking: "Am I right thinking you said...?"
- Clarifying: "I'm not sure I understand..."
- Affirming: "I appreciate you being open with me..."
- Empathy: "I understand you are worried..."

- Open-ended questions: “How do you feel about that?”
- Reflecting: “You look happy about that!”
- Summarising: “It seems there are several things concerning you...”

Things to avoid:

- Talking about yourself.
- Changing the subject or ‘derailing’, e.g. making a joke.
- Advising, diagnosing, criticising, being right, having the last word.
- Thinking ahead or rehearsing what you will say next.
- Ignoring or denying the speakers' feelings.
- Pretending you understand if you don't, placating.
- Comparing (“In my experience...”).
- Mind-reading, looking for hidden meanings and second-guessing.

Centred Speaking:

- Speak only for yourself
- Usually begin with 'I'
- Speak about your feelings, not what has been 'done' to you
- Describe the action or behaviour as you experienced it
- Say what you would have preferred
- What impact did it have on you?