



LISTENING TO

PAIN

A Practical Guide to Support People
Through Difficulty

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THE HELPER'S PROBLEM

Many of us are Helpers by nature. We are wired to be caring and protective. Especially with the people we love, we want to comfort them and take away their pain. We want to problem-solve, find solutions, and "fix". Whether or not you feel like it, if you are taking the time to read this e-book, you my friend are a Helper.

Desiring to help and to "fix" comes from a lovely place and a compassionate heart, however this can leave us with a problem.

Sometimes, in our effort to assist and make things better, we can miss people's pain entirely.

The fact is, sometimes it is more helpful to listen to pain than to try and take it away.

Listening is a craft, a skill that can be honed over time. If you can learn to listen well and to sit with people's pain, you will help those struggling around you in a meaningful way.

If we can listen to their pain, we will be providing help that is much more meaningful and long-term.

THE PROCESS OF PAIN

Everyone has some form of pain. It could be the loss of a loved one, living with a chronic physical or mental illness, a history of trauma or neglect, a job loss, a relationship loss, or some other form of difficulty.

Pain is part of the human experience and is an inevitable part of life. But this doesn't mean that pain should go unchecked or unnoticed. In fact, it is crucial that we all process our pain.

When I say "process" pain, I mean the ability for someone to express their emotions, work through their pain, and come to a place of healing.

It doesn't necessarily mean the pain goes away entirely; it means the pain no longer has mastery over their life.

This is important because many serious life challenges result from unprocessed pain.

For example, did you know that anger is a sign of unprocessed pain? This is why anger management classes often don't work.

Anger is a secondary emotion, usually masking the root issues of either grief or sadness. If grief and sadness are not processed, eventually they can turn into anger, rage, depression, or another mental health issue.

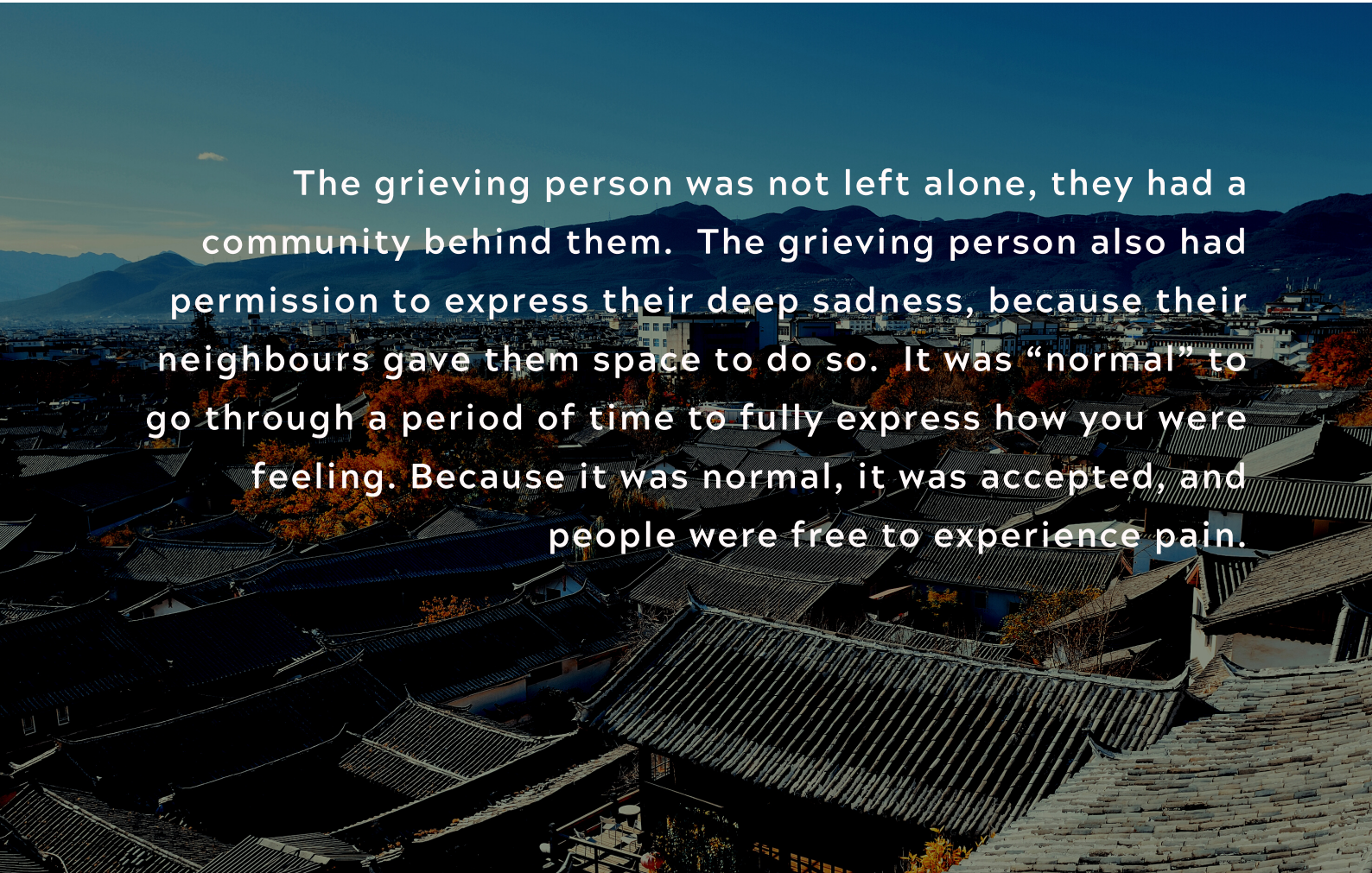


We can help alleviate some of these challenges by helping people process their pain. We want to help, and giving them opportunity to process pain is something meaningful that we can do.

We help people process their pain by listening to them. Listening gives them space to express (or vent) their pain, to tell their story, and this will help their heart and mind process their emotions.

Historically, humans were very good at letting each other process pain, specifically with regard to grief. Cultures around the world had powerful rituals for the grieving process, allowing people space to lament their tremendous loss.

For example, in some cultures, people would put on dark, ragged clothing, and the entire village would come to the home of the deceased and would weep and wail for several days, as a community.



The grieving person was not left alone, they had a community behind them. The grieving person also had permission to express their deep sadness, because their neighbours gave them space to do so. It was “normal” to go through a period of time to fully express how you were feeling. Because it was normal, it was accepted, and people were free to experience pain.

In today's western culture, we have sadly missed the mark. Life is busy, there is plenty of distraction, and people are isolated from one another. For many people their only connection with others is through social media.

This means that when someone experiences grief, loss, or has some other form of pain, they are often left to navigate this on their own. Their sorrow is invisible. Their pain is hidden from view.

Our neighbours don't come out to grieve with us. Our community doesn't lament with us.

Well-meaning people are often not aware of the pain around them. Or sometimes they are just too busy. In fact, people are so busy they often forget to even send a card. Or maybe they are lost in their own invisible pain.

In addition to feeling invisible, a person who is going through difficulty has to return to their day-to-day duties (work, school, family) and they have to function despite their pain.

The result is unprocessed and unresolved pain.



PAIN "MATTERS"

In physics, there is a law called the "Conservation of Mass" which states that, "matter cannot be created or destroyed".

Matter may take different forms, but matter itself is constant.

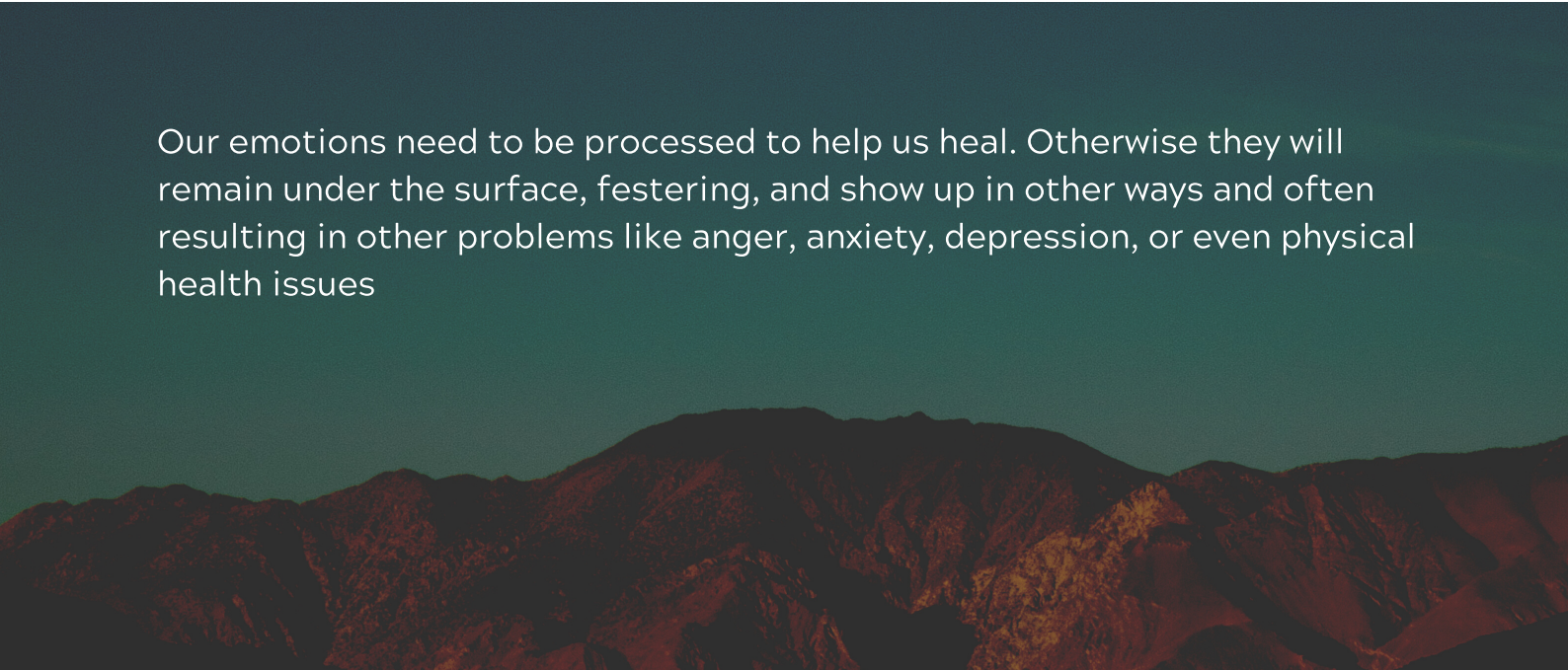
Water (as an example), can be vapour, liquid, or solid. Water can transition in form, but it cannot simply disappear. Water is constant and exists in one form or another.

Think of emotional pain like matter. Emotions are also constant and exist in one form or another.

If we experience emotional pain, we need to express and process it.

If we don't, those emotions don't just go away. They continue to exist, buried deep, and ultimately take on a different form.

Our emotions need to be processed to help us heal. Otherwise they will remain under the surface, festering, and show up in other ways and often resulting in other problems like anger, anxiety, depression, or even physical health issues




As noted earlier, unprocessed grief can result in anger. The grief doesn't disappear, it takes on a new form that comes with it's own challenges.

Anger releases adrenaline, (an active hormone), and cortisol, (a stress hormone), in our bodies. Overtime, these hormones can cause physical symptoms such as muscle fatigue, inflammation, a compromised immune system, and digestive issues (to name a few).

Psychologically, unprocessed pain can result in serious mental health issues such as anxiety, major depressive disorder, or even psychosis.

I believe the highest cost of unprocessed pain is suicide: when unprocessed pain leaves people carrying such a heavy burden that all hope seems lost. Emotions matter, people matter.



As a society we need to get back to basics, we need to recognize that we are wired to experience our emotions and feel our pain. We also do this best in community, when we support each other through pain.

The American Psychological Association found that the number one factor to increase our resilience (our ability to recover after difficulty) is meaningful connection. We need connection. We need each other.

You can be part of someone's journey to help them navigate through their emotional pain.

THE BENEFITS OF LISTENING

We know that processing pain is essential, and there are negative consequences that result from leaving pain to fester.

So how do we help people in their pain? We listen.

Let me invite you to think of a time when someone listened to you. I am hopeful you have an experience to draw from.

Maybe you had a bad day at work and had coffee with a friend to vent. Maybe you were going through a difficult season

and had a good chat with a family member.

Think about what it felt like to have someone really listen to you and hear you.

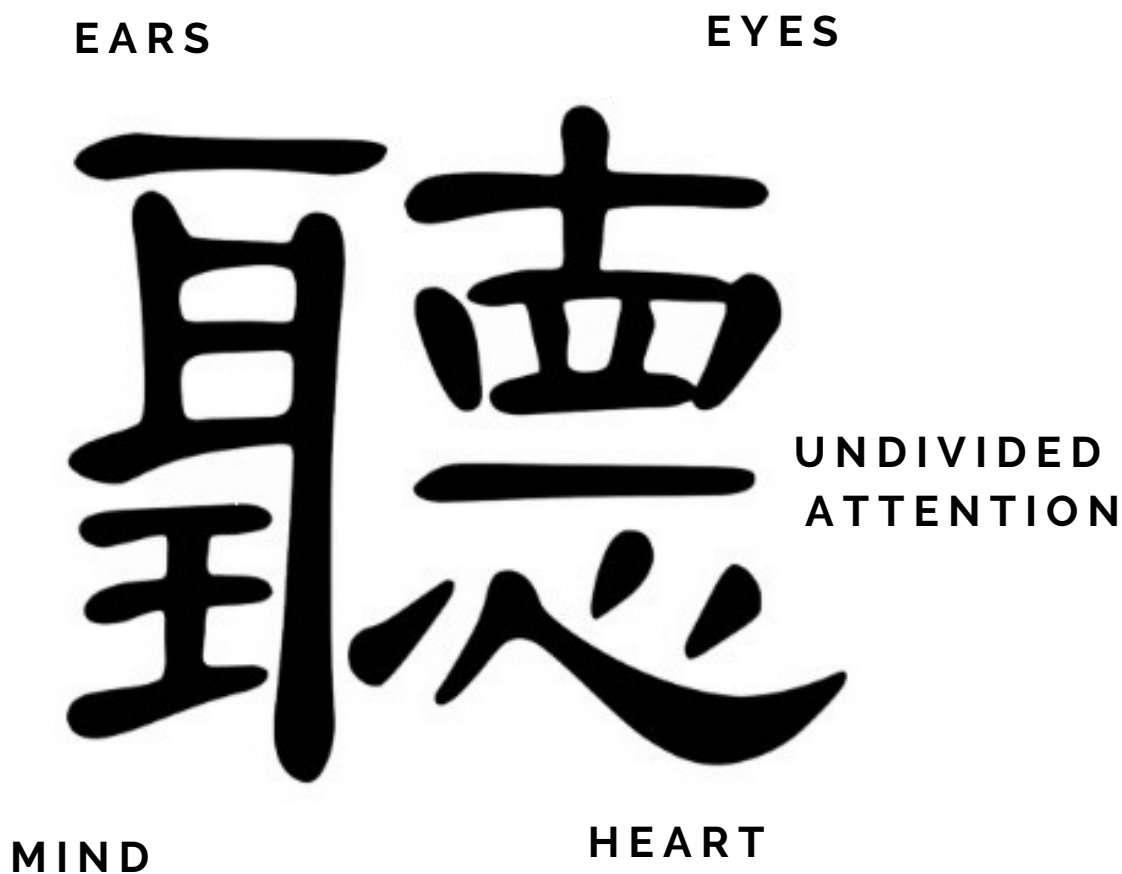
Think about how being listened to possibly lowered your anxiety or lightened a burden you were carrying.

Listening is powerful.



The Chinese language is beautiful. Their characters are pictures within pictures that often convey deep meaning.

The traditional Chinese character for "listen" is comprised of 5 parts:



This is an excellent picture of what it takes to listen well. It is more than just hearing someone. It is being fully present, with our heart and mind attuned to the person we are with.

In the counselling profession, we estimate that up to 70% of counselling is listening. Therapeutic techniques matter, but not as much as listening well.

Listening, in and of itself, is healing. Literally. When we listen it gives space for the speaker to express pent up emotional pain and this not only has an emotional outcome, but it also has a physiological one.

Venting, or “therapeutic release” as I like to call it, allows us to use up some of the excess cortisol (stress hormone) that accumulates in our body when we are upset.

As noted earlier, cortisol can have detrimental effects in our bodies, and relieving ourselves of it can have positive health implications.

Also, the feelings of connection resulting from having a caring person listening to us can release dopamine and oxytocin; two positive neurochemicals that counteract cortisol and improve mood. Dopamine and oxytocin are our body's natural anti-depressants and anti-anxieties.

Simply put, when we feel listened to, we feel less stress. When we feel cared for, we feel better.



THE LISTENING CRAFT

So how do we listen well? How do we help people on their emotional processing journey?

We use Active Listening skills.

Next we will review 8 Active Listening Skills that will help you support people who are processing pain.

1. BE PRESENT

Remember the Chinese symbol for “listen”? It included "undivided attention". Being present means keeping your heart and mind in the present moment, with the person you are listening to.

It is normal human behavior for our minds to wander. We could be listening to heartache and still have our minds drift to what we are going to make for supper later that evening. Don't feel guilty when that happens, just notice it and then bring yourself back to the present.

Try to minimize outside distractions as well. Put your phone on silent. Turn off the TV. People feel listened to when they know they have your undivided attention.

2. BE AWARE OF YOUR NONVERBALS

Up to 90% of communication is nonverbal. Someone could be the most knowledgeable Therapist in the country, but if their nonverbal body language misses the mark, so will their supportive intervention.

We need to have caring nonverbals including:

EYE CONTACT

Have you ever been talking to someone when they weren't looking at you? I can just picture a parent saying to their child, "look at me when I am speaking to you!", and the reason for this is because we know that eye contact means someone is listening attentively.

One exception to this is car rides. Car rides are an amazing phenomenon where people can have very real, candid, and heartfelt conversations without looking directly at one another. We call this, "shoulder-to-shoulder time" and these result in some of the best counselling sessions. Outside of being in a car or on the phone, make eye contact.

If someone is very anxious or agitated, keep the eye contact gentle. Too much eye contact can feel threatening when someone isn't feeling safe to begin with.



BE AWARE OF YOUR NONVERBALS

LEAN IN

When we lean back, we may feel comfortable but this can make us appear disinterested or possibly upset. Lean in toward the person, just ever so slightly, and it will look like you are fully invested in the conversation.

HAVE OPEN BODY POSTURE

This essentially means don't cross your arms against your chest. This can look threatening, aggressive, like you are in a hurry, or like you don't care about what they are saying.

Try to keep your body posture relaxed and open. Open body posture sends the message that you are receptive and are inviting them to share their story.



BE AWARE OF YOUR NONVERBALS

NOD

Gentle nodding every now and then is another key listening behavior. People can take this overboard and nod at everything, and this comes across as trying too hard or being ingenuine. Natural and occasional nodding looks like good listening.

PLAY WITH YOUR EARLOBE

This is a funny one, but psychologists have found that when we grab or touch our earlobe when listening to someone it is a sign that we are not only listening, but we are very invested and care about what is being said. It is also a good way to stay grounded and present, by rubbing your earlobe you are reminding yourself to listen and to focus.



BE AWARE OF YOUR NONVERBALS

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

This sounds simple but believe me this is a skill. You may be surprised at what your resting face looks like (no offense!). Many of us can tend to have a scowl when we are resting, even if we are in a good mood. If you have a headache or are tired, this can also show on your face. Try to have a caring expression when listening.

The flip side of this is trying to have an appropriate level of expression for what you are listening to. If someone is telling you about their grief, then smiling the entire time is probably going to send the wrong message. Try to match your expression to the feelings being expressed and err on the side of a "caring" expression rather than a "happy" one.



BE AWARE OF YOUR NONVERBALS

YOUR TONE

The tone of our voice is another nonverbal skill. Ensure your tone is caring and again matches the content being shared. If you are naturally gruff or verbose, you may need to tone it down a bit.

If you are very soft-spoken and the person you are listening to isn't, then they may need you to raise your volume a notch or two so that they feel like you can handle what they are saying.

Adding a simple, "hmmm" now and again can also help.

Remember when I said listening is a skill?
This is just one section and look at all there is
to be aware of!

How we look, how we present, and how we
sound are all important parts of active
listening.



3. LISTEN WITH YOUR EYES

Listening with our ears is not the only thing that is important. Listening with our eyes is also key (unless you are on the phone with the person or driving of course).

As I shared earlier, much of our communication is nonverbal and expressed through body language, and this means that there is important information being offered by the person through how they present visually.

We all know what it is like when someone says they are "fine" but everything about their body language and their facial expression is saying otherwise. This is important information for us to consider.

By looking at someone, we can usually tell if they are sad, overwhelmed, anxious, lost, angry, or confused. You can listen to these emotions by watching them, and this becomes part of the conversation.

You will be able to say things like, "I see you are really heartbroken about this" because you can literally see it on their face. This will help the person feel cared for and validated.

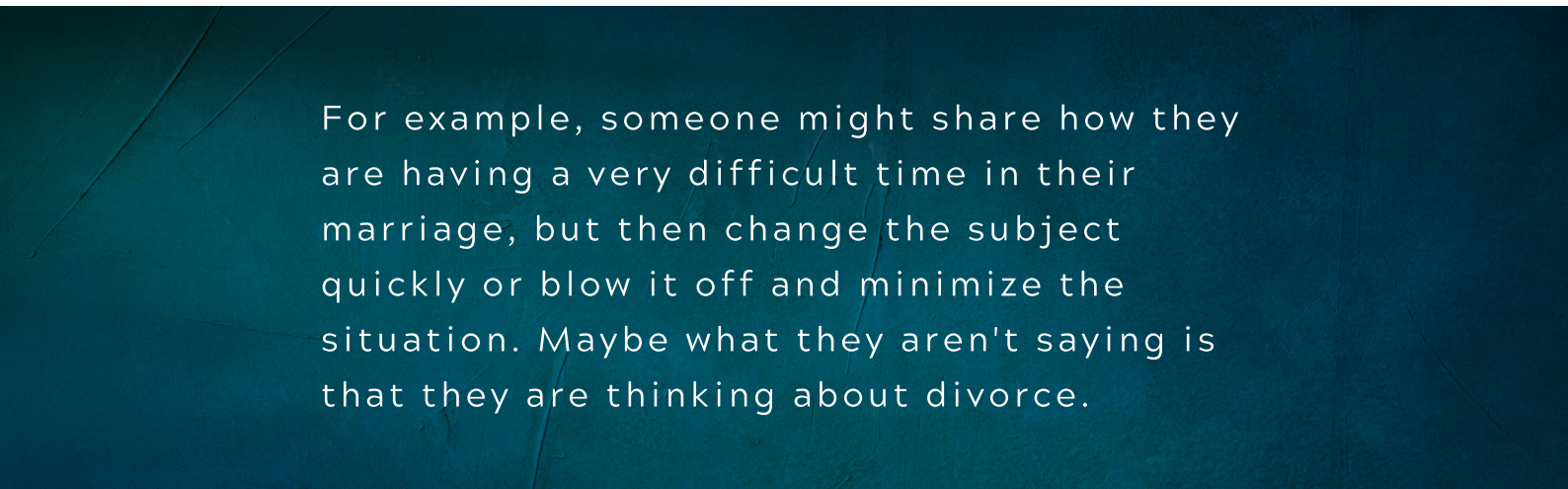
Also, by watching and observing, you will know if you need to adjust your approach. If the person appears anxious, maybe you need to move slightly backwards and give them more space. If they start to cry, maybe silence is what is called for in that moment.

So, listen with your eyes.

4. LISTEN TO WHAT ISN'T BEING SAID

The person speaking is giving us important information not only in what they are saying, but in what they are NOT saying.

Sometimes we need to read between the lines and listen for clues about what they aren't saying... but really want to be saying. This is another reason why being focused and present is so important.



For example, someone might share how they are having a very difficult time in their marriage, but then change the subject quickly or blow it off and minimize the situation. Maybe what they aren't saying is that they are thinking about divorce.

LISTEN TO WHAT ISN'T BEING SAID

People who are suicidal often do this. They will talk about hopelessness, about how there is no point anymore, and give other clues that they are thinking of suicide without directly saying it. We need to be listening to what they are NOT saying in order to help them.

I recommend the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (A.S.I.S.T.), which covers suicide intervention in great detail. The basic principle is to listen to the clues about suicide, and then ask directly "are you thinking of killing yourself?". By asking this we are showing we are listening with our heart, hearing what isn't being said, and we give them space and permission to talk about suicide.

Please look into taking the A.S.I.S.T. course (offered by LivingWorks) to learn more about how to help someone who is thinking of suicide, as that is beyond the scope of this eBook. You can find out more at www.livingworks.net.

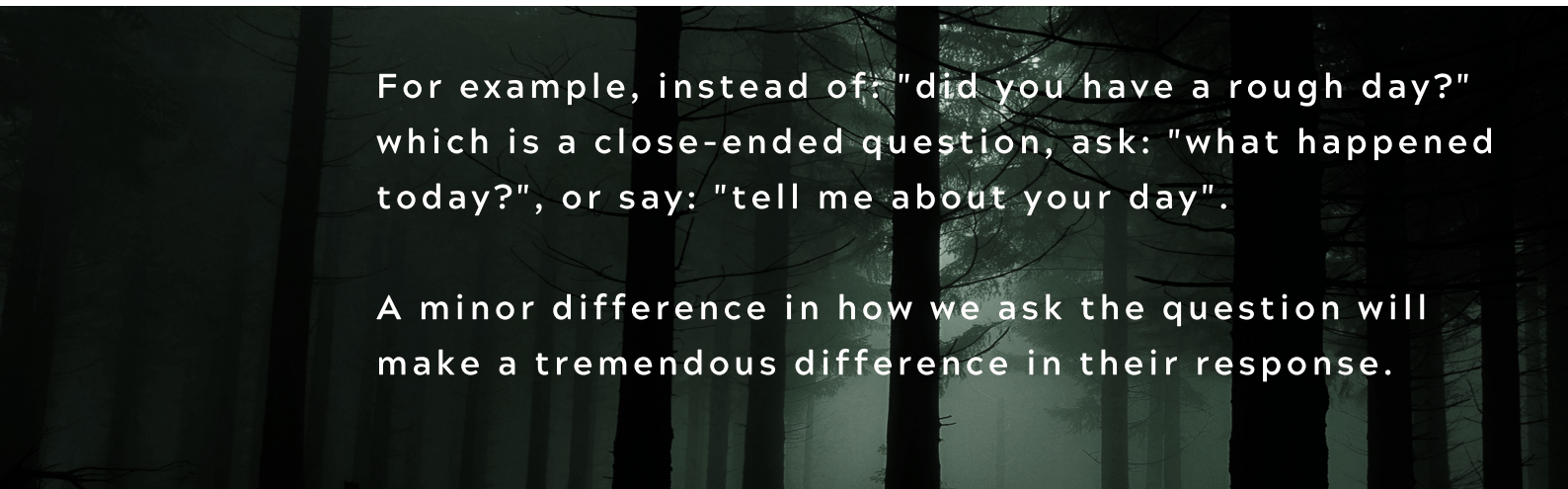


5. ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Be interested and ask questions. This invites the person to keep talking, giving them more opportunity to express their pain.

We want to avoid close-ended questions and use open-ended. Open-ended questions are questions that get more than a "yes or no" response.

These are the "Who, What, Where, Why, When, and How" questions (and as an added bonus, open-ended questions are a great tool to ask teenagers about their day).



For example, instead of: "did you have a rough day?" which is a close-ended question, ask: "what happened today?", or say: "tell me about your day".

A minor difference in how we ask the question will make a tremendous difference in their response.

6. PARAPHRASE AND SUMMARIZE

To show the speaker we are listening, and to confirm we are hearing what they are trying to say, we need to repeat information back to them.

For example, with someone who says, "I just feel like I can never trust anyone because I was so hurt by my boyfriend", you might paraphrase something back like:

"So it's going to be hard for you to trust anyone because you've had your trust broken." Use their words and add some of your own.

They may correct you, and say, "no, I mean this..." but either way they will feel like you are listening and will see you are trying to understand.



7. VALIDATE EMOTIONS

Validate the speaker's emotions. Validation is how we show someone that their experience and how they feel matters. Validation and empathy are important parts of supportive listening, showing people that their emotions have value. We all want to feel validated.

If I return home after a difficult day at work and my husband says, "you just need to be more positive", how would that make me feel?

I would probably feel misunderstood, frustrated, and well, angry.

If, however he said something like: "wow, it sounds like you had a frustrating day". Ahh, the relief, he is listening and understands me!

You see, as Helpers (and you wouldn't be reading this unless you are a Helper) we can tend to jump to advice before people are ready, before we have validated their experience and their emotions.

Try not to offer advice unless asked. In the meantime, offer empathic responses and validate people's emotions.

8. LISTEN WITH ACCEPTANCE

We are human and automatic thoughts are part of our nature. It is completely normal to have automatic thoughts and judgments when listening to someone's story.

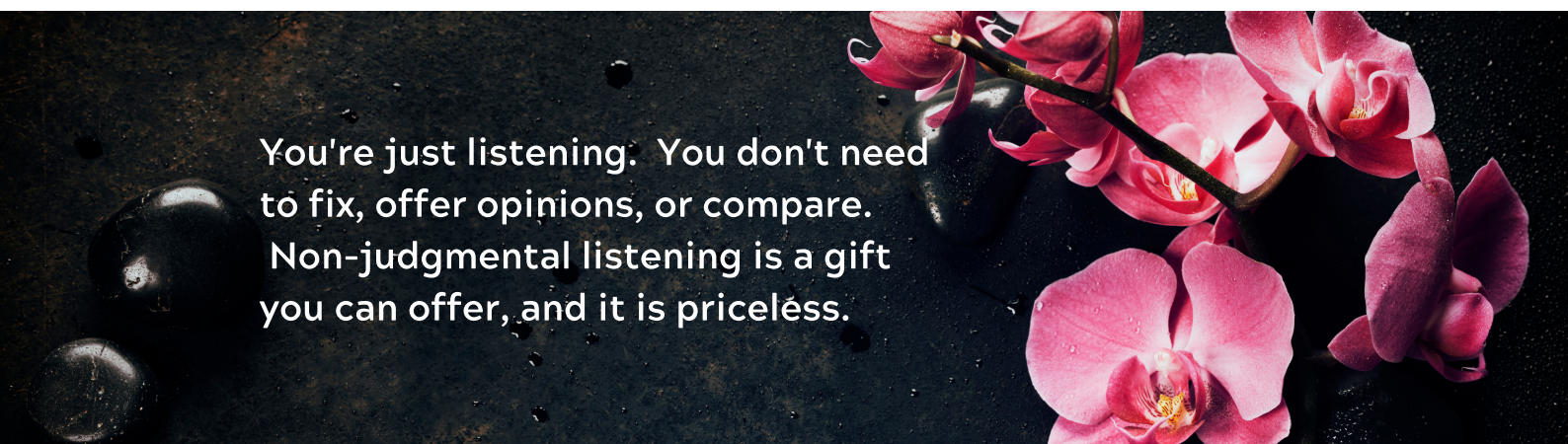
Maybe your initial thought is their pain is not as burdensome as someone else you know, or even as heavy as your own pain. Maybe you have the thought that they "should" be over their loss by now and move on. Maybe you think they are being overreactive.

While these thoughts are normal and expected, they can have a detrimental impact on our supportive listening. In order to listen well, in a manner that will really help people, we need to listen without judgment.

We do this by "suspending judgment". This is a conscious effort on our part to put those automatic preconceived notions aside, and come back the present moment as we listen to the person.

Those judgments in our head will prevent us from listening with our heart. True listening involves the heart.

Look at the person with an open heart, willing to learn and willing to accept everything at face value. Because the fact is, their emotions have value. Period.

A photograph of several pink orchids with delicate petals and yellow centers, resting on a dark, textured surface. To the left of the flowers are several smooth, dark, rounded stones. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the petals and the smoothness of the stones.

You're just listening. You don't need
to fix, offer opinions, or compare.
Non-judgmental listening is a gift
you can offer, and it is priceless.

CARE FOR THE LISTENER

After reviewing 8 essential listening skills, it should be pretty clear that active listening consumes energy. Each of the skills I have reviewed take conscious effort and use up our internal resources. This is why listening is a gift; it costs us something. It costs our time and our energy.

Therefore, if all you take away from this book is how to listen to others, we may have a problem. We can't stop there. The same grace you extend to others needs to be extended toward yourself.

We all have an emotional bank account, and each time we provide empathic supportive listening, it is as if that person makes a small withdrawal. This is fine, as long as we keep replenishing the account. If we neglect to do so, we will end up in overdraft and ultimately go bankrupt.

In the past I have personally let my emotional bank account become completely depleted, and I have watched many others do the same.

The genuine desire to help others can become our downfall if we don't learn how to care for ourselves. This includes self-care and allowing space to process our own pain. We also deserve to have a listening ear and a safe environment to process our emotions. Even Helpers need help.

So do me a favour.

Think of 5 things that bring you joy. Maybe it's playing an instrument, maybe it's spending time with grandchildren, maybe it's art, journaling, or going for a run. Think of your 5 things.

Then think of the names of two people. Two people that when you are around them you feel energized. Friends or family who are good listeners, who are authentic, and who care about you. Think of them.

Now, I want you to make a commitment to yourself: that you will build time in your schedule to do those five things and to connect with those two people.

Life is busy, and if we are not intentional about investing in ourselves, it won't happen. Take time for you, and it will put you in a better place to care for others. If you are listened to, you are in a better place to listen to others.

And often the best way to be intentional and have a fresh start, is to write things down:

My 5 Things:

My 2 People:

PRACTICE

After working in the mental health field for over a decade and a half, I can honestly tell you that listening to people well is likely the most essential skill for any Helper.

I have worked with many people who told me their deep sorrows and pain, and they shared that they didn't feel like they had anyone in their personal life they could talk to. They felt misunderstood and unheard by the people who cared for them most.


I attribute this to the fact that well-meaning people don't understand what supportive listening really is.

I just covered 8 essential skills and I promise you, if you start to practice these you will notice a difference in your relationships. When people feel heard, they tend to get less defensive. When people feel heard, they tend to be less stressed. When people feel heard, they tend to begin to heal.

Practice listening. Don't be hard on yourself if you make mistakes, maybe you might paraphrase something wrong, or get your nonverbals all jumbled up, it happens to all of us. What matters is your intention and your willingness to grow.

Practice and give people space to process their pain with you. Be present and don't worry about taking away their pain or solving their problems for them, just listen.

Sometimes the best help you can give them is an open heart, unconditional love, and a listening ear.



THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME
TO READ THIS BOOK. I SINCERELY
HOPE YOU FIND IT HELPFUL IN YOUR
JOURNEY TO SUPPORT OTHERS
AROUND YOU. I'D LOVE TO HEAR
YOUR FEEDBACK.

YOU CAN LEAVE A MESSAGE
THROUGH MY WEBSITE, COMMENT
ON INSTAGRAM, OR SEND AN EMAIL.
I ALWAYS APPRECIATE WHEN
PEOPLE TAKE THE TIME TO SHARE
THEIR EXPERIENCE.

THANK YOU FOR BEING A HELPER,
AND SOMEONE WITH A HEART THAT
ENDEAVOURS TO LISTEN WELL.

I WISH YOU PEACE, HAPPINESS, AND
A LIFE FULL OF JOY AND PURPOSE.

ANN-MARIE

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