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Effective Communication

The Power of Slowing Down & The Power of Deep Listening

By Helen Tang, RPC, CHt, CMA

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In any relationship, conflict is virtually inevitable because of our individual uniqueness and differences. In itself, conflict is not a problem. The problem is in the way we handle conflicts and resolve differences.

In my work as a counsellor, I have come to recognize that one of the reasons why conflicts arise is because people don't really listen to each other. We hear each other at an intellectual level, but we don't listen to each other deeply and fully.

True listening is an art; it requires us to take in information from our ears and into our heart. Often times, when we communicate with another person, our mind is too pre-occupied with our own thoughts, agenda, and assumptions. We are often too busy thinking of what to say to respond to the person we are talking to rather than fully taking in what they are saying.

One of the things I do when working with individuals and couples is that I often ask people to slow down. In this increasingly fast-paced world, some of us spend much of the day dealing with the daily grind of life, taking kids to their soccer game, busily working away to meet deadlines at work, fulfilling family obligations, running household errands and much more. We rush from one place to the next without taking the time to reflect and truly communicate. Often times, our emotional state becomes more reactive when we choose to rush around like that, instead of pacing ourselves.

In certain instances, it is ok to be reactive. For example, when there is an emergency or when you are in danger. However, it is not good to be in a reactive state constantly, especially when you are dealing with people.

Why is slowing down so important, especially when it comes to effective communication? The primary reason I ask people to slow down is because when you slow down, you tend to listen better. Often times, when we are rushed, we are also more reactive, impatient, defensive and quick to anger. External information does not

land very well when our internal space isn't receptive. We are more prone to be triggered when our internal state isn't receptive and calm. One person's reactivity can also act as a trigger or catalyst for another, and pretty soon, you may find yourself in an unpleasant situation where feelings are hurt, and misunderstandings and resentment begin to build.

So how do you slow down? Let us suppose you are about to have a conversation with your partner to resolve a disagreement and you are feeling a little overwhelmed after a busy day at work. One option you have is to postpone the conversation until you are in a better space. If that is not possible, you can start out by taking in a few deep breaths to ground yourself. You can also supplement this process of slowing down with some helpful imagery or visualizations.

After you've sensed a slowing down in your physical body and your internal space, it is now a good time to set an intention for the interaction you are about to have with your partner. Ask yourself whether your intention is about connection and understanding or if it is about winning an argument and getting your way. I suspect most people would say that they want connection and understanding. If that is the case, it is important to align your action with that primary intention. One of the actions that is in alignment with the intention of connection is to listen fully and deeply.

How do you listen deeply and how is it different from our usual way of listening? The answer is a simple one, but it isn't always easy to do because it takes practice. The way you listen deeply is that you suspend your agenda and assumptions, and you make room for your partner's points of view. This is where people often get stuck because they assume that if they listen to the other person's view fully and deeply, they would have to surrender their own needs and agree with the other person. I wish to emphasize here that this assumption is not true. You are not asked to abandon your view, you are not asked to have to agree with your partner, all you need to do is to make room for his/her views so they can express themselves. Much like welcoming a guest into your house, you simply welcome and acknowledge your partner's view. Deep listening is a precious gift to both you and your partner.

Often times when I facilitate a dialogue that involves deep listening like that in my office, people are surprised to find that previously unsolvable matter isn't so hopeless after all. Many times, part of the disconnection in relationships (marriage or otherwise) is the struggle of being heard. When we truly hear and are heard by another, our internal world changes. In those moments of connection, understanding, and softened edges, our differences don't seem to take on the same importance as it once did. At times, to their own surprise, people may even find that they don't have much of a difference in their point of view after all. Other times, the solution to the problem may even present itself because an environment of collaboration has been created between two people, initiated by the practice of deep listening.

If a conversation between two people is to be looked upon as a dance, ask yourself what kind of dance do you wish to be engaged in; graceful, elegant, collaborative, generous in spirit, or awkward, tension-filled, competitive and anxiety ridden? You may not always have full control over the direction of the conversation, but you certainly have an enormous amount of influence over it. How do you plan to use your influence? By being a follower, going along with the way you have always done it, or, by being a leader, choosing to do something differently this time through the art of deep listening? The choice is yours, as it has always been.

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