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## **I was molested by my sister...**

### Inference

How good are you at listening and really hearing what someone is saying? If you are the average person, then the answer is “not particularly good.” The following is an exercise I used with my graduate therapy students. How well can you do in this listening exercise?

When listening to people, sentence structure can be especially important in picking up inferences. For example, here are five sentences. Each infers something different. Pretend that your friend just said this to you:

**“I was molested by my sister for four years.”**

Now, compare that to:

**“My sister molested me for four years.”**

Depending on which sentence the person uses, the person talking him and him presents different inferences. These two sentences reflect two different concerns by the speaker. What is the difference in what the person is telling you?

Some of you are going to say, “There is no difference. They both are saying the same thing!” Sadly, that is the answer that I often got from my interns. You are not going to be a therapeutic person if you cannot hear what is important to the person seeking your comfort and solace.

Look back at the first sentence again. What is the person’s major concern? What are the first words out of her mouth? “The molest!”

This person needs to feel safe with someone who will listen to his/hers concerns. In the first sentence, you will want to explore what being molested means. Be sure to look at the persons feelings of guilt, shame, confusion, anger, etc. You will want to look at the conflicting feelings about the molest. Was it painful, traumatic, or did it feel good? What does it mean if the molest felt good?

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Now, look at the second sentence. What is the major concern here? “My sister!” Here, you would want to explore how the talker feels about what sister did. You will want to look at feelings of anger, exploitation, betrayal, and trust. You will want to look at the person’s behaviors in adult relationships. What kind of a person gets molested by their own sister? What are the judgments that you put on your sister now? What are the

judgments that you put on yourself? What else could you choose to think about your sister, about yourself?

Are you able to hear the differences between the two sentences? Can you see how you would change your responses based on what the person said?

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Now, look at sentence three, four and five. What are the major concerns in these three sentences?

Compare:

**"Four years is a long time to be molested by my sister."**

Here the major concern is the length of time that the molest continued without any intervention. Notice that it is almost like who it was done by is not as important as how long it lasted. So, what feelings do you want to explore this time? Be sure to listen to the verbs when someone is speaking. Using "is a long time" tells you that the molest, at least the emotional part, is still going on for that person.

Compared to:

**"Four years was a long time to be molested by my sister."**

Pay attention to the past or present tenses in these two last sentences. In forming your inferences, listen to how the person frames their sentence.

If you are having trouble with hearing inferences, try sharing it with your friends and see if you can come up with some answers together.

Let me give you one more sentence:

**"The molest, by my sister, lasted four years."** Here you have three clauses, molest, sister, and four years. It is as if all three are of equal importance. So, where do you start? If you cannot figure out where to start, you can ask the person who is talking! "It sounds like the molest, that was done by your sister and lasted four years is weighing heavily on your heart. Where would you like to start?"

At that point, the person will probably start at the easiest, least distressing part of the story. This will be a test for both of you. Can you be trusted? Or, are you going to start asking a bunch of questions or try to give answers to "fix it"? This is the time you need to be quiet, keep eye contact and, when there is a prolonged period of silence, paraphrase something like this.

"That is very heavy and it must be extremely hard to carry that for so many years. Would you like to share it with me?" If the answer is yes, start with what you think will be the most important to the person.

Depending on how safe the person feels, you may or may not want to explore what they just said. If the person says no, do not be surprised. Then you might ask, "Do you have

a friend or therapist that you would feel safe talking to?” If they say no, then you might suggest “anytime you need a shoulder to lean on, I’m here for you.”

If they choose to talk to you about what is weighing them down, the most important rule is **do not give answers or try to fix it for them**. The emotional pain is healthy! Pain is what gets us to go to the doctor.

The most helpful thing you can do is to emotionally and/or physically hold their hand. Do not be afraid to show your own emotions by shedding a few tears to let them know that you can understand their pain. Let them feel. Let them be angry. You can respond with, “You have every right to be angry. If that had happened to me, I would be so angry.”

Starting paraphrasing might sound something like this, “What I’m hearing from you is that what your sister did by sexually touching you has made you confused, angry and untrusting. It sounds like the result is that you find it hard to trust anyone.”

Remember, paraphrasing is a guess. This allows the talker to say “No,” and tell you what is important to them. “Yes, that is what I said but, I only have trouble trusting people my own age.” Taking that new information, then it will be time to offer another paraphrase. “Oh, I got it now, what I hear you saying is. . .”

Paraphrasing clarifies what is being said both for the listener and for the talker.

The goal is to allow the person who is hurting to express **all** their feelings such as confusion, guilt, anger, fear, shame, etc. The verbal rule says, **“Feelings, expressed as intensely as they are felt, will be experienced and are then free to change.”**

You can be a part of this change if you are willing to listen without giving answers or trying to fix it for them.

In the above example was the molest victim a male or female? Whichever you think it was will tell you about your own past experiences and present biases.

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Dr. Downing’s e-book: “Taking Control of Your Life: How to Drastically Increase Your Emotional Education (EQ)” is available at:  
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