



Affective Center for Therapy

2560 W. Shaw, Suite 105, Fresno, CA 93711

559.436-0428 Fax: 559.436-0438

PARAPHRASING

I hear you saying. . .

The art of listening is one of the most difficult skills to learn.

"Everybody listens but nobody is hearing me." "Yea, I hear you."

The art of listening is one of the most valuable skills you can learn in order to communicate love and increase a person's self-esteem. "Yes Dear, I'm listening."

The art of listening can mend broken hearts and restore relationships, but you are not listening to a word I am saying. "What do you mean I'm not listening? I heard every word you said. I can repeat it back to you word for word!"

So, how is it that I do not feel heard?

Listening is not just hearing the words that the other person said. It is hearing what the person is feeling and what is meant to that person.

Let's say a person just said to me, "I love you." How am I to hear that?

- ☒ Is that a request for me to tell you that I love you also,
- ☒ Is it a request for sex,
- ☒ Is it a reassurance that our relationship is doing great,
- ☒ Is it a spontaneous expression of how you are feeling,
- ☒ Or is it sarcasm?

Words have no meanings. You will never find the meaning of a word in the dictionary. Look up each word, I love you. The dictionary will give you a number of definitions for a word but it will never tell you what the person meant by what they said.

Words have no meanings, Only people have meanings.

"It is beautiful day today." What is the person saying?

- ☒ Are they just passing the time of day?
- ☒ Are they talking about the weather?
- ☒ Are they expressing an internal state of being?
- ☒ Are they excited because they just got a raise?

If words have no meanings how can you tell if people are hearing what you said in the way you intended it to be heard?

"The dishes are in the sink." Does the other person hear that as they are not doing their job and they need to do the dishes, OR do they hear that you are recognizing what needs to be done around the house and offering to start doing your part? What the other person hears could hang the fate of your relationship!

The message you want the other person to hear is often not the message that they receive.

"In fifteen years of marriage, I have never seen anyone I would rather be married to than you."

"You mean that you have been looking for someone for fifteen years?!!"

The message is never in what the sayer says, It is in what the hearer hears.

So, how can a person know that they are hearing what the other person intended them to hear? Being able to recite back word for word what the other person said is **not** listening. Listening is **not** word swapping. Many people use word swapping and call it paraphrasing, which it is not.

This is a bad book.

"I hear you saying this book isn't any good." (Word swap)
The problem with word swapping is that it gives the impression of understanding without having any idea what the person really meant.

What did you hear the person say about the book? Does it have bad words in it? Is the binding coming apart? Is the book full of lies and distortions? Does it use bad grammar? Does the book incite rebellion?

As you are starting to see, Paraphrasing requires that you guess at what the person meant.

Jon should have never become a teacher.

“I hear you saying that teaching is the wrong job for Jon.” (Word swap)

Have you got any idea of what is being said about Jon? Does he come to school drunk? Is he verbally abusive to the students? Does he not do his lesson plans? Or, is it that Jon likes to live high on the hog and he cannot do that on a teacher’s salary? Maybe, Jon should have become a rock star? Or even the superintendant of schools but not a school teacher.

Word swapping is worse than not checking it out in the first place because with word swapping, you could leave thinking that Jon molests his kids! “Did you hear what Judy said about Jon, he molests his kids?”

**Paraphrasing is the only thing you can do wrong
And be right at.**

Paraphrasing requires that you make guesses at what the person is saying. Guesses by their very nature are going to be wrong at least some of the time. Being wrong is good when it comes to listening skills.

If you could paraphrase with a 100% accurately what the other person was saying, one of two things would happen. First, the person would assume that you understood what they were saying and they would stop talking, leaving much of what could be said to be assumed. Or two, the person would become spooked, “This guy can look into my soul,” and they would quit talking. In either case it is not good, for it opens the door to misunderstandings and conflict.

You want the person to keep talking. The more they talk, the more you will learn. When it comes to paraphrasing, you will know you are right on when you hear the person say, “No you are not getting it.” It is then that you get to hear what you missed. Here are some other statements that tell you are doing a good job at guessing:

- “Yea, that is what I said but, it isn’t what I meant. Here is what I meant.”
- “No, that is not it at all. Here is what I’m saying...”
- “You got part of it right; here is what you missed.”
- “Wow, I guess that is what I am saying!”

**Listening is paraphrasing back what you heard
In a way so that the other person feels heard.**

Knowing when to use paraphrasing makes you a more effective communicator. Paraphrasing is just one of the tools of a good communicator. As with any tool, you do not use all the time. A hammer is a valuable tool but it is designed to do only certain jobs. It does not do well in cutting a piece of wood! Knowing what paraphrasing does will aid you in knowing when to use paraphrasing.

What Paraphrasing Does:

1. Paraphrasing REDUCES ANXIETY and RESTORES LOGIC.
When your feelings go up, your logic goes down. A person suffering from major anxiety can be restored by thirty minutes of concentrated hearing and paraphrasing back what they are saying. Have you ever tried to be logical with someone who is very angry? Lots of luck. It doesn't matter whether it is anger, fear or someone contemplating suicide, paraphrasing reduces the emotion and helps to restore logic. If someone is sitting on the edge of a building getting ready to jump, the rule is to keep them talking. The best way to do this is to paraphrase, paraphrase, paraphrase. Years ago, there was a lady on the Fresno County Board of Supervisors who was a great communicator. As chairperson for the Board, Sharon, would often have some very angry, frustrated and/or anxious county residents coming before her. She was the best supervisor at being able to paraphrase and restore logic to the proceedings.

**Feelings expressed verbally, as intensely as they are felt,
will take place and reduce in intensity
and are then free to change.**

2. Paraphrasing SHORTENS ANGRY DISCUSSIONS.
What usually happens when someone is angry is that the other person feels attacked and gets angry back. One person uses putdowns and threats and the other person uses putdowns and threats back; it is like putting out a fire with gasoline. In paraphrasing, you are reflecting back

what you are hearing and the inferences that you are picking up on from the person speaking. You are not resisting, defending or giving answers. The result is that you allow the **Verbal Rule** to work: *Feelings expressed verbally, as intensely as they are felt, will take place, reduce in intensity and are then free to change.* The Verbal Rule is also known as the 15 minute rule. In my Saturday Huge Group therapy, I have watched for over 23 years as people have stood up and expressed their anger as strongly as they could, and it has **never** lasted over 15 minutes. It is very hard to stay angry with someone who is really listening to what you are saying.

3. LENGTHENS *and* DEEPENS REGULAR COMMUNICATIONS.

Paraphrasing allows the talker to feel safe and, as a result, to be more reflective, introspective and share on a deeper level about issues that are really important. You will often find that it is more important to be listened to than to get your way!

4. CLARIFIES FOR BOTH.

Paraphrasing allows the listener to clarify meaning and inferences to make sure they are hearing the message the way that the talker meant it. It also allows the talker to clarify what they are saying. Don't be surprised if you are paraphrasing and the other person says, "Yea, that is what I said, but that is not what I meant. What I meant was . . ."

5. DEMONSTRATES INTEREST, CARING *and* LOVE.

Research states that the single most important behavior a person can do to communicate love is to listen to their mate. Of course, this applies to children as much or more than it does to adults. Bosses who listen to their employees consistently get the highest approval scores and have employees who work the hardest.

6. IMPARTS SENSE OF SELF-WORTH.

Everyone wants their child to have a good self image. It goes clear back to "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." Reading to a child lets them know that they are important. Listening is an even more powerful message to the child that what they think and feel are important and that they are valuable enough to have someone listen to them.

7. MAKES OTHERS MORE WILLING TO LISTEN.

This one is my favorite. All of us want to be listened to. As a parent, we all think that what we have to say is important and worth listening to because we have more experience (and have made more mistakes). If you want to be listened to, first be the listener. If you are doing a good job of paraphrasing, there will come a time when the person talking will start to slow down, stop, and then may ask, "What do you think?" Now is your time to share your ideas. But, don't be surprised if the person starts to argue or interrupt. All that says is that you need to go back to paraphrasing!

Three Levels of Communication

There are three levels in every communication. There is the Content, It is a beautiful day. We already talked about what that might mean to the person saying it. But, there are also two more areas that you need to listen for and make guesses about.

Whenever a person is talking, they are talking on three levels at the same time. The first level is CONTENT. When paraphrasing, you will need to picture and describe what you are hearing. The second level is how the person FEELS about what he/she is saying, and the third level is what it MEANS to the person talking. (When paraphrasing, it does not matter what order you present these three levels.)

Content: Is it a beautiful day because the sun is shining, or because it is raining and we need the rain for the crops? Am I worried we will not get enough or am I excited that at least we are getting some rain? Or is it a beautiful day because I just met you, or because I got a tax refund? Or am I excited that my mother-in-law is coming or that she is not coming? What makes it a beautiful day for that person? Or are they just passing the time of day? I could ask you a bunch of questions but that might put the talker on the defensive. Whatever your guess, the person will correct you (if they want to let you into their world). If not, you will find that out also.

The boss says, "I need you to buy some new chairs for the office by this weekend." Do you know what he is talking about? If he had said, "By this weekend, you will need to buy new chairs for the office," would that have meant something different?

How many chairs does he want? What type of chair, leather, cloth, what color? Does he want formal or informal, wood or metal? What image

is he going for in the office? Are the chairs for employees or for customers? Is there a rush? What is so important about this weekend?

To get this information, you could start bombarding him with a string of questions and risk the boss getting annoyed at you, “Don’t you know what a chair is?” or you could just risk going out and getting what you *think* he wants (how many different kinds of chairs could there be anyway?). Or you could paraphrase back to him, it’s your neck.

LEVELS OF COMMUNICATIONS

CONTENT

MEANINGS

FEELINGS

Before you start paraphrasing you might consider the two other levels of communication. What are his **FEELINGS** about his need to get the new chairs? Is he *nervous* about making a good impression with a possible large contractor? Or, is he *afraid* because the OSHA inspector is coming out due to a complaint and he is afraid of getting fined? Or, is he *worried* because he has a big investor coming to look the place over?

Seldom, if ever, do you have just one feeling about something. We often love and hate the same person or thing. Therefore, when paraphrasing feelings, be sure to include at least a couple of different feelings, “I hear you saying that you are excited and scared about what could come out of this meeting.”

The third level is what it **MEANS** to the person who is talking to you. I hear you saying that you are concerned about the image that our office is presenting to the public and, with a new office look and we could start to turn around the business.

Paraphrasing is a way of comparing the “pictures” that are in your head with the “pictures” in the head of the talker. Questions, on the other hand, lead the other person to the information that you are interested in, but will not help you discover the ideas and feelings that are important to the talker. There is nothing wrong with asking questions to get the information you need. “What is your address?” “Where were you born?” If you are helping someone fill out a form, you could paraphrase all day and probably never find out this information!

**With Questions, you will discover
What you are interested in
BUT you will not discover
What is important to the other person.**

Inferences:

In listening, pay attention to the inferences that are contained in what the person has said. An inference is a conclusion drawn from evidence or reasoning. An inference is not said, but it is something that is implied.

Inferences need to be checked out; paraphrasing is one of the best ways of doing this. "The dishes are in the sink." What is the inference here? You're not doing your job? Or is it, Can I help?

Inferences are very common in our every day speech. What inferences can you draw from these statements?

"You got in late last night."

"There is no food in the house."

"Were you looking at that waitress?"

"The dog needs washing."

"You seem to be gaining weight."

"Did you ever take your other girlfriends to this restaurant?"

Now, go back over these statements and make other inferences.

Inferences need to be incorporated into your paraphrasing as a way of checking out if you are hearing what you think you are hearing.

Sentence structure can be very important in picking up inferences. For example here are four 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."

What is the difference in what the person telling you?

What if the person said it this way?

"The molest by my sister lasted four years."

Now, compare that to:

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

What is the most important idea, topic in each of these four sentences?

If you are not getting it yet, let me make it easier.

"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:

- A Mother, along with her grown daughter, is sitting in your living room. Mom and Dad are in their mid-60's. They are retired and having a wonderful time traveling all over the world. Suddenly, out of the blue, Mom says:

I hope you kids know your father and I aren't going to be leaving you anything when we die. Our legacy to you was raising you well and loving you the way we do.

What is your inference about what the daughter is feeling? What is your inference about what the mother is feeling? What does it mean to each?

This would be a good time to start paraphrasing on all three levels. With Mom you might want to start with:

I hear you saying that you are feeling . . . (name at least two feelings).

When, about or because. . . (picture and describe in behavioral terms).

And what that means to you is. . .

Meanings are often the hardest to guess at, it might sound like this, "It sounds like you are wishing you had told your daughter this several years ago and now you are afraid that she is going to be angry at you and Dad."

Paraphrasing is guessing. Inferences are guesses.

Paraphrasing is the only thing you can do wrong, and be right at.

Not everybody wants to listen or be listened to! Paraphrasing is not an answer to all the world problems. It is simply one of many communication tools. It is one that is greatly under used, and it is one that could make your relationships easier, closer and more loving.

Myron Doc Downing PhD, LMFT

DocDowninng@att.net

www.ACT-Fresno.com