



REAL CONVERSATIONS

essentially
you

The fundamentals of listening to connect

A deep dive into the principles and tactics of connecting beyond the surface, to allow people to feel seen and heard at the core of what they're experiencing

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Reflection

Have you ever had a conversation with someone where you've needed to support them with a mental health issue or through a time of emotional pain?

Yes / No

In which capacity have you played the role of a supporter?

At work

People Manager

Peer Supporter

Colleague

HR representative

Supporting a customer

Other _____

At home

Parent

Partner

Sibling

Friend

Family member

Reflection

Looking back...

When you've supported someone with a mental health issue

What were some of the painful feelings you felt, that you don't want to feel again, when in the same situation?

(Emotion e.g. "Guilt") → **(Why e.g. "I didn't know what to say")**

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Looking forward...

When you're supporting someone with a mental health issue

What are some positive feelings you want to experience when in this situation in future?

(Emotion e.g. "Pride") → **(Why e.g. "Making a positive difference")**

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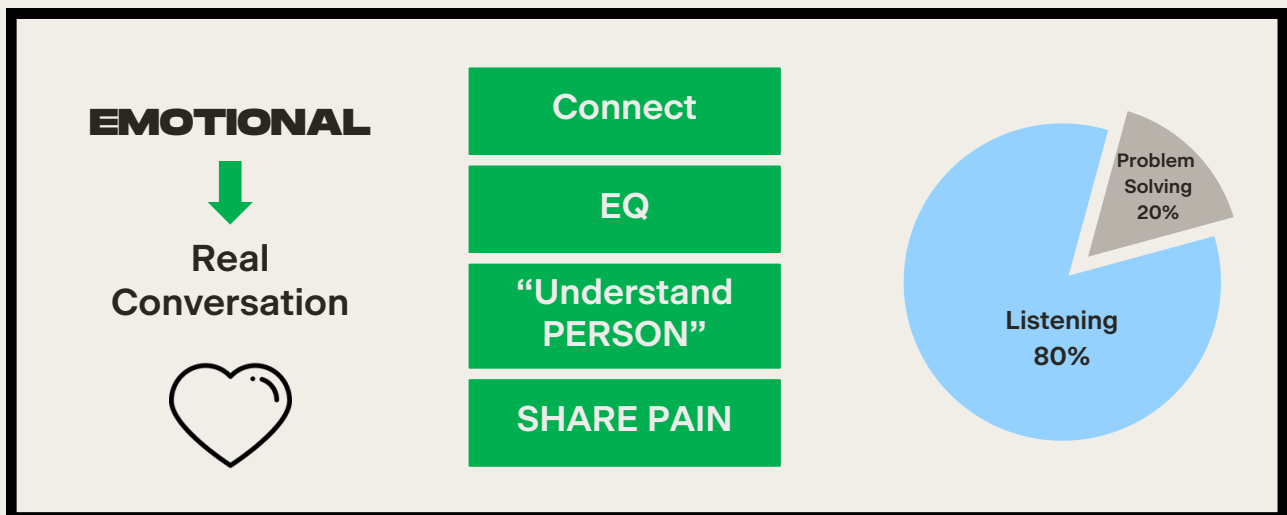
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EVOLVE YOUR DEFINITION OF “HELPFUL”

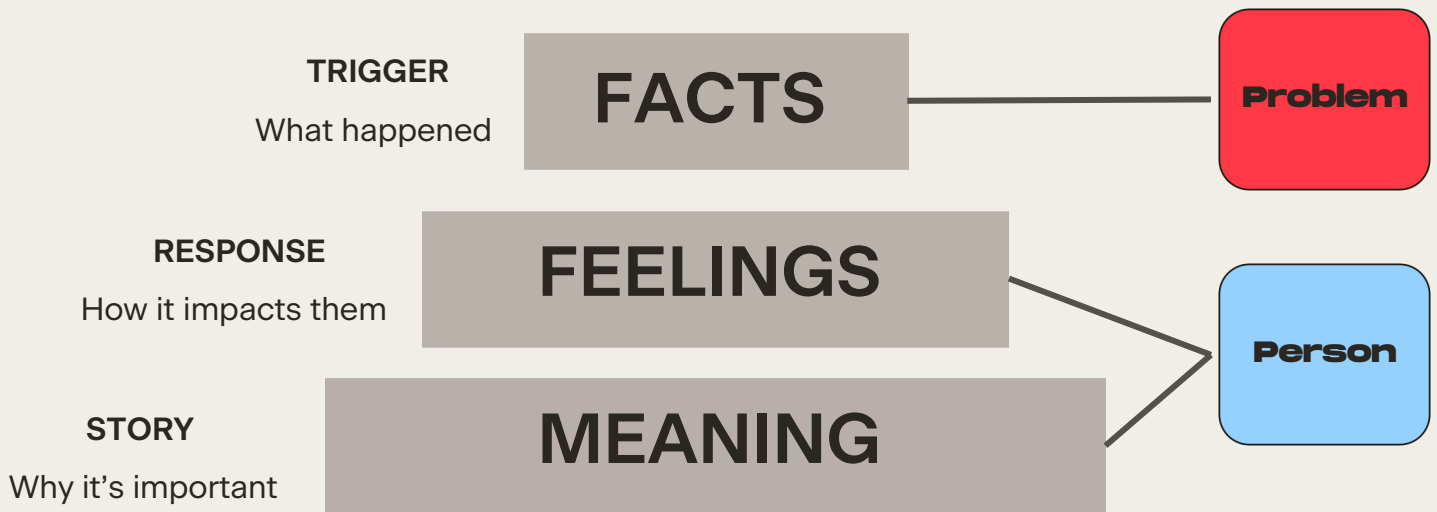
FROM EXCLUSIVELY THIS



TO INCLUDE THIS



Layers of Understanding



Layer 1: Facts

The objective details that someone will share with you in a conversation: the what, who, when, where.

Layer 2: Feelings

The brain filters all of our experiences and then produces an emotional response. This layer is a step closer to connection as we move into understanding the person, not the problem.

Layer 3: Meaning

Meaning links our outer and inner worlds. As supporters, our main goal above all else is to allow someone to feel understood. Understanding is not about the truth, but their truth. If someone is experiencing an emotion (feeling) it's because something on the outside world (fact) is being interpreted (meaning) as either meeting or threatening a core psychological need. The pursuit of meaning is about trying to understand why something has been deemed important to them as an individual. Another word for meaning is story. Your past experiences create your values, motivators, beliefs and needs. Every new second of your life is being directly influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by every previous second you have ever lived. That's why two people can go through an identical experience yet be affected in completely different ways. Why? Because of the meaning they have given to it based on the story they hold.

Coherence Cake Reflection

Read the following scenarios and brainstorm different ways each person may feel and why

FACTS	FEELINGS	MEANING
Eva, a high school student, gets a 7/10 mark on her math test		
Matt, a 31-year-old carpenter, asks Jess out on a date, but she tells him she just sees him as a friend		
Aaron, a married father with a child, recently lost a significant amount of money on an investment		
Lisa, a single mother of 3 children, is entering the fifth month of lockdown due to Covid		

curiosity

May be a helpful listening principle for you if:

- You hear people frequently tell you 'you wouldn't understand' or that you have a condescending tone.
- You see people step on eggshells when they're around you, especially when certain topics arise.
- You end up in a lot of arguments, and differences escalate quickly.
- You speak over the top of people and don't let them finish.
- You've been called a narcissist or know-it-all.

How to practise:

- Find what 'could be' when you're convinced you know 'what is'.
- Search for a link instead of a chink in their logic.
- Accept that it feels good to be right, but it feels better to grow.
- Use this rule: the further it is from your comfort zone, the more you need to lean in.
- Stop thinking you need to agree with someone in order to be curious.
- Instead of focusing just on the facts, try to search for the deeper meaning at play to uncover what's really bothering someone, based on their needs, fears and values.
- Catch yourself listening-to-respond (i.e. planning what you're going to say next to solve it) and replace it with listening-to-reflect (i.e. creating space to consider how this situation is impacting the person).
- When thinking about solutions, try to use their own knowledge and wisdom through questions instead of giving them the answer.
- Use phrases like, 'I'd like to know more about that, can you elaborate?' instead of shutting down the conversation with a dead end, or pretending you understood if you didn't.
- Don't be afraid to ask the other person to explain their issue in language that you can relate to, perhaps using an analogy or metaphor that feels accessible to you.
- Reflect on a time where you've lost something or someone you've loved from being closed minded and do a cost- benefit analysis to see if it was worth it.

Presence

May be a helpful listening principle for you if:

- You respond with 'busy' every time someone asks how you are.
- You struggle to let people in emotionally and put your walls up.
- You are constantly on your phone and find it hard to be in the moment.
- You dominate conversations and don't give adequate breathing room to other people's input.
- You believe quality time is just about being in someone's company.

How to practise:

- Schedule time in the calendar and set up personal check-ins as a meeting invite, even in personal settings with friends and family. It may feel weirdly formal at first, but it's incredibly helpful to carve out the time so you can be present.
- Practise mindfulness so you have a better awareness of your own body, senses and emotions. Your nervous system is your tuning fork. The more you can tap into your own emotions, the better you can pick up on someone else's.
- Build tolerance for bearing witness to someone's pain without needing to fix them so they trust you can hold it with them. The moment something becomes emotional, breathe into it. Don't switch topics or make it about you. Just breathe.
- Create the emotional space inside yourself so you aren't giving from an empty cup. That may look like auditing which things drain your energy and doing less of them so you have more to spend on others.
- When you can't show up well, don't. Make time for things that are important. Invest in quality time, don't just tick the box of attendance.
- Make an effort to put your phone away and remove distractions. 89% of people say that during their last social interaction, they took out a phone, and 82% said that it hurt the conversation they were in.¹
- Nod and gesture that you are following while maintaining eye contact.
- Don't fill all the silences: let things land, even if it's awkward.
- If you notice someone drift off in a daydream or become distracted, use the phrase 'Hey, where did you go?' in a calm voice. It's a non-confrontational way of inviting them back into the moment with you, or to bring up the thing that is preventing them from being present.

Compassion

May be a helpful listening principle for you if:

- You personally haven't had any mental health issues and struggle to relate.
- You come across as cold, critical or cutthroat.
- You are supporting someone in emotional pain while they also display difficult behaviour or poor performance.
- You are pushing someone to get better quicker than what they have capacity for.
- You seem to get stuck in your own past experiences when trying to support others.

How to practise:

- Assume it is real for them, even if you haven't been through it or if you have but responded differently.
- Separate someone's feelings from their behaviour. Go soft on feelings, hard on behaviour.
- Be conscious of subtle forms of judgement, like a voice inflection that implies sarcasm.
- Don't overuse humour as a device to reduce the awkwardness in the lead-up to a 'real' moment, as it may imply that you don't understand how painful it is for the. Better to use humour on the way 'out' of a moment that has climaxed emotionally.
- Separate your story from their story: don't project your insecurities or beliefs onto them.
- Do an audit of your internal biases and ask people for feedback if they feel judged by you to shine light on potential gaps in your knowledge or worldview.
- The phrase 'Help me understand what this represents for you' can bring a sense of relief to a conversation that is becoming judgmental.

Strength

May be a helpful listening principle for you if:

- You feel easily overwhelmed when a problem arises.
- You take on everyone's emotions with very porous boundaries.
- You believe people avoid telling you important things so as not to worry you.
- Your default response is to imagine the worst-case scenario.
- You have an anxious-preoccupied attachment style.

How to practise:

- Build capacity in your nervous system by exposing yourself to things you're afraid of to increase your resilience (ideally with the help of a qualified professional therapist).
- Try small yet safe challenges every day that stretch your comfort zone, such as taking an ice bath, talking to a stranger or trying something new like a dance class.
- Use self-awareness training tactics (such as mindful meditation) to become conscious of catastrophised thoughts, so you can interrupt the habit of worry and find a more integrated perspective.
- Have a daily relaxation ritual like exercise that helps you discharge the day and refuel.
- Use phrases like 'we are going to work through this together' instead of saying 'everything is going to be fine', so you don't unrealistically commit or lose integrity by overpromising.
- When someone is freaking out, do not freak out with them. Take a deep breath and find your centre.
- Practise being 'un-strong' after moments where you've held a lot of emotional weight.

Consistency

May be a helpful listening principle for you if:

- You're exhausted from the emotional drain of conversations.
- You find yourself going all in or all out in your relationships.
- You feel guilty for setting high expectations of support and not following through.
- You act weird and awkward after someone opens up to you.
- You are someone who finds it hard to keep a secret.

How to practise:

- When you get resentful, be aware you could have the wrong boundaries. Don't take it out on the relationship; simply use your tools to make adjustments.
- Make a 'no shaming' promise, whereby you will never make someone feel wrong for desiring help or stating their needs. Instead, you will simply communicate if and how you can or can't meet them.
- Stop imposing your timeline on how quickly they should feel better. Focus on your own sphere of control: what you can and can't do.
- Don't see a setback in their journey as a restart. Allow people to fumble and heal in non-linear ways without them fearing the support network will lose faith.
- Ensure you are honouring someone's trust by not sharing information with a third party (unless you are required to breach confidentiality; more on this soon).
- Stick to your word, and if you can't, update the commitment or promise you made instead of just letting it fall without notice.

Listening Principles Reflection

As you reflect on these principles, try to avoid thinking you need to master them all. High-performance psychology shows us that, in most cases, it's better to triple down on your strengths than it is to transform your weaknesses into weapons. What that means is, if you're not naturally good at something, simply learn how to not let it detract from your ability to complete the goal. Focus the majority of your efforts on making your primary skill as good as it can be. For example, if you're easily distracted when communicating with others, don't try to become the most present person in the world, just be conscious it doesn't take away from the connection: bring it from a negative to a neutral. Spend most of your efforts investing in cultivating an attribute you have a strong predisposition for.

Which ones do you feel competent at already, and which ones would you like get better at?

Rank the following principles from 1-5
(1 being most strong, 5 being least strong)

Curiosity	→
Presence	→
Compassion	→
Strength	→
Consistency	→

QUESTIONS

✓ TOWARD THE PAIN

✗ Look for solutions



STATEMENTS

✓ VALIDATE THE PAIN

✗ Reassure, dispute or cheer up

Facts

- Can you tell me what happened from your perspective?
- What's been going on recently?
- Can you say more about that?
- Has this happened before?
- What did you/they say/do exactly?

Feelings

- How does it make you feel?
- What's that been like for you?
- How is that playing out emotionally?
- How has it affected your day-to-day life?
- What signs are you noticing that tell you you're not ok?

Meaning

- What does this represent for you?
- What story are you telling yourself about all this?
- What does that make you believe about yourself?
- What's the hardest part?
- What's most important to you above all of this?



Sentence Stem:
repeat their word/s

MIRRORING

Echo back a word or phrase from what they've said.. using their words.

- Signals that you are paying attention
- Incredibly helpful to “get in sync”
- Creates space to solidify and settle
- Allow for a pause after mirroring



Sentence Stem:
What I'm hearing is...
Did I get that right?"

SUMMARISING

Give a brief statement of what you've heard to confirm accuracy... using your words.

- Recap and consolidate macro points
- Infer what you think they meant
- Ask if you've got it correct
- It's ok if you misunderstood or they say “no”



Sentence Stem:
“mhmm, ok...”

ACKNOWLEDGING

Let it land. Give their story room to be digested and appreciated.

- Have the courage to not jump in
- Let the silence do the heavy lifting
- Fillers build momentum
- Keep the pace steady



Sentence Stem:
"That sounds..."

REFLECTING

Comment out loud about the emotional impact of a situation.

- Help to deepen conversation from facts to the feelings.
- Explore what's not yet being said
- Use advanced vocabulary - as specific as possible (e.g. "infuriated" > "mad")



Sentence Stem:
"That makes sense
because..."

LINKING

Connect the dots between their fact and their feeling using their meaning.

- Play back their "WHY"
- Good tool to use when their feeling or acting very different to how you would
- Not required to agree with or endorse their perspective, simply acknowledge it



Sentence Stem:
"Even though it's not
the same as you..."

PERSONAL SHARING

Provide support by sharing your own personal experience

- Must be after you have heard them first
- Share to help, not steal to the focus
- Let them ask for more detail if desired
- Relate to the situation and/or the feeling
- Helps to show "hyper-understanding"

Listening sentence stems

Take a picture of the below table with your phone and save it in your favourites folder to easily refer back to before/during a Real Conversation

TECHNIQUE	SENTENCE STEM
QUESTION – FACTS	“Can you say more about that?”
QUESTION – FEELINGS	“How does that make you feel?”
QUESTION – MEAINNG	“What does this represent for you?”
MIRRORING	(repeat their word/s)
SUMMARISING	“What I’m hearing is... did I get that right?”
ACKNOWLEDGING	(silence, gesture or sound)
REFLECTING	“That sounds ...”
LINKING	“That makes sense because ...”
PERSONAL SHARING	“Even though it’s not the same as you ...”

Listening reflection & practise

QUESTION - FACTS

Respond to the following...

“I really can’t be bothered with work today”

QUESTION - FEELINGS

Respond to the following...

“After almost a decade of marriage, my partner and I are getting divorced”

QUESTION - MEANING

Respond to the following...

“We haven’t been able to get pregnant, even though we’ve been trying for over a year”

Listening reflection & practise

MIRRORING

Respond to the following...

“I don’t know what to do, I am so confused”

SUMMARISING

Respond to the following...

“My son Daniel is still getting picked on at school and I have talked to the teachers, the principal, some of the other parents and nothing has changed! He comes home looking defeated every day, that’s if I can even get him to go to school, because he always tries to convince me to let him stay home. I feel bad making him go still, because I know he’s having a rough time, but I don’t know what else to do”

ACKNOWLEDGING

Respond to the following...

“The vet has said that Banjo’s cancer is inoperable, and I’m gutted”

Listening reflection & practise

REFLECTING

Respond to the following...

“I feel like I have tried everything to get these headaches under control, but it’s just relentless”

LINKING

Respond to the following...

“I was such a high achiever in school. Ever since getting into the workforce, every time I get a bad review from my boss it just crushes me!”

PERSONAL SHARING

Respond to the following...

“I’m so afraid that I’m going to lose my job in this company restructure, and then we’ll be in real financial trouble”
