

Guidelines for A World Day of Listening

We can go days, weeks, years, maybe even a lifetime without ever really being listened to. Then when we experience the connection of listening and being listened to, it feels like a basic human right.

We believe the world would be a better place if listening was more highly valued. Listening is about receiving how another person is struggling, without editing it or spinning it, trying to fix it, or arguing and mixing in other views. Really listening to someone allows them to understand themselves more deeply and often when something in the person has been deeply heard, they can then open up to new possibilities.

A World Day of Listening is the result of many Listeners from around the world, representing many traditions and approaches or none, working together. We do not promote any doctrine, political or religious view, we are not pushing for any outcome, and we are not marketing any product.

HOW WE LISTEN

These guidelines are mostly for 'street listening' but can be adapted for other venues and models of listening. If you have not been trained in some form of 'active listening', we encourage you to hold a local practice day before the World Day. Listening is simple, but not always easy:

What we don't do - we do not offer advice, take sides, or argue, judge or interpret.

Listening is an active process where we:

- let our attention drop down inside, slow down, clearing ourselves of any agenda.
- keep our attention on the person talking, look at them warmly, with interest.
- usually keep silent as long as the person needs so that they can find what they want to say. (resist the urge to fill space or ask questions. It is OK to Listen to silence).
- often reflect back what the person says, keeping close to their words, especially important emotional words.
- paraphrase the main points in the person's story and feelings.
- say back our sense of what the person is saying, to check it, letting the person correct us.
- ask occasional questions for clarification but remembering we are not in charge of what happens and we don't need to make anything happen.
- try not to make any assumptions about the person. If we get something wrong, make a simple apology and move back to their story incorporating the correction.
- stay open-hearted.

If someone is saying something you disagree with, try to honestly just Listen, hear how it is for that person, how their perspective makes sense to them. It is not your job to change minds. Acknowledge the feeling of their conviction. Afterwards you can also get a chance to be Listened to by someone in your group.

Keep your full attention on the speaker. Sit with your body open and receptive, not crossed arms or holding anything, take off sunglasses etc. Try not to let in any distractions. Others in your group who are not currently Listening can deal with anything that comes up externally.

USING QUESTIONS WHILE LISTENING

The most basic requirement in Listening is to be present, giving your attention to this other person.

The second basic requirement is to give space for the speaker to tell their story however they wish - this means to be quiet and not to interrupt except for clarification or to make sure you are following them. Thirdly, saying back the main points of the story can help the person remain in touch with their deeper point while not adding in any distortion of your own.

After those three points, it can also be helpful sometimes to ask a few questions.

Open Questions: Phrased so that the person can't just answer yes or no but will be encouraged to begin to tell you something of themselves.

Clarifying Questions: These are questions that ask the speaker to clarify the meaning of words or events. Questions like, "When you said 'feeling alone' did you still mean 'lonely' or are those different things?". It shows the speaker that you are actively listening, and are truly interested in understanding the details of their story.

Broader Perspective: These questions can be used when you notice a speaker cycling into hopelessness, "I understand things have been difficult, but apart from that area of your life, are there things that are going OK today?"

Final Inquiry: "How has it felt to have this chat with me today?" This offers an explicit opportunity for the speaker to check what the experience has been like.

HOW WE CONDUCT OURSELVES

Allow people to approach you and your group. Smile and be open and approachable but you don't need to solicit people to participate. Don't stand together in groups of more than 3 as this can be intimidating. You can sit with an empty chair across from you.

Have a simple sign that announces 'Free Listening' or 'World Day of Listening'. Have a few leaflets that explain the event (our template is an example).

Check that you have permission to hold the event at this location. If it turns out to be private property and you are asked to move on, simply do so politely. The event is promoting an atmosphere of 'grace' and gentleness.

QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT WE ARE DOING

You will be asked a lot of specific questions by the public. Here are some good ways to frame your answers to common questions.

What are you doing this for?

"For you. We think listening is a forgotten 'art' and we want people to experience it again. We believe people often feel better once they have been understood and have understood themselves more through listening".

Can I have your number?

"I'm really just here to listen for today, so we aren't offering ongoing contact".

Can I have some money?

"I'm just here to listen, we aren't handing out any money".

SAFETY

- Stay in groups of three or more if you are doing 'street listening'. But don't all stand together as that makes approach difficult.
- Because men are apt to come directly to female listeners, make sure everyone is in eye contact of each other.
- Dress casual.
- Don't bring bags or any personal things to the event.
- Keep an eye on your surroundings.
- Do not allow anyone to use your phone.
- If you feel uncomfortable with someone, politely suggest that you include another listener.
- You can always say NO to someone if they ask you to do something.

After the event it is good to have a **group debrief** - a chance to listen to each other. If there is someone who would like to take part as a listener but feels shy about listening to the public, this person could be a support during the day to listen to the Listeners. Personal stories can evoke a lot in each of us and we also need to be listened to...

(Thanks to the Urban Confessionals and other groups whose guidelines have helped us prepare for the World Day of Listening)