

The Listening-Sharing Exercise

Rationale

Listening and sharing are two of the most important communication tools in any family and healthy relationship. It is by listening with your heart that you encourage emotional intimacy with your spouse and children. It is by sharing from your soul that you allow yourself to be vulnerable. Mutual vulnerability in shared experiences builds trust and increases relational bonding. A formula for healthy relationship is the following:

**I = R + V , or, Intimacy develops by taking Risks and allowing
T yourself to be Vulnerable with another over Time**

The Listening-Sharing Exercise provides a vehicle for practicing emotional intimacy, for working out issues, and for building trust in your relationships.

Procedures

First, with your spouse or child, agree on a 30-minute segment of time where you can complete the exercise without interruption. Make an appointment with each other. Assure that there will be privacy. Avoid interruptions by telephone, television, computer, blackberry, gameboy, playstation, newspaper, or other distractions.

Then decide on your joint topic. At first, I encourage a “starter” topic that is safe, unthreatening for either of you, and yet informative. Often I encourage clients to talk about three positive feelings you each had outside of your time with the other. This topic is safe because you are talking about positive feelings. It is unthreatening because it is about a time outside of your

experience with the other. It is informative when you share something that the other is unlikely to know much about.

As you practice the Listening-Sharing Exercise over time, you can use the sequence to tackle hotter topics and to problem solve. It's important at first, however, to get used to using active listening with each other and to practice the undivided attention needed to take on more volatile topics.

Next, you decide who goes first. That person is the Talker. The other is the Listener. After initial roles are agreed upon, begin the 30-minute exercise. Time allocations are as follow:

FOR TEN MINUTES. Talker, share your feelings and experiences on topic. Talk for the full ten minutes. Elaborate on your experiences on topic. Listener, you get the hard part. Listen with your heart. That is, search for the Talker's feelings within the words. Empathize, encourage, and listen intently. You get to practice your active listening.

FOR FIVE MINUTES. Share with each other your experience in your roles. What was it like to "have the floor" and talk for ten full minutes? Did you have trouble filling the time allotment? Were your Listener's comments helpful to you? Listener, how hard was it for you to avoid the "Don'ts?" Did you avoid giving solutions, interjecting off topic? Did you stay interested and involved for the whole ten minutes?

FOR TEN MINUTES. Part two is the same as part one, except now the part one Talker is the part two Listener and the part one Listener is the part two Talker. Talker, find your own experience to share. Be thorough and very descriptive. Listener, use the Active Listening tools and avoid the "Don'ts."

FOR FIVE MINUTES. The half hour exercise is concluded with the second sharing of your experiences in the exercise now that the initial roles had been reversed. Did you like better being the Talker or the Listener? Can you see how this kind of exchange can be helpful in solving problems? In conflict resolution? In working out compromises? Can you imagine bonding closer emotionally with each other by using these listening-sharing tools?

Therapeutic Impact

Having completed and felt good about this “safe topic” listening-sharing experience, you can now plan scheduled times together to repeat the exercise, but with harder topics. Any time you have a beef with the other, flip into listening-sharing mode to help you get through it. After you feel confident with these communication tools, any of you in the family can “call a session” with any other with whom you have a beef.

With confidence, using these tools becomes second nature and an integral part of most every conversation in the family when you are working on the relationships. The 30-minute time frame and structured roles are less important than simply using the tools in focused conversation. Less formally, then, the conversations will be more give and take, but with each being more aware of the other’s feelings and both of you joining forces to work on problems.

These tools can be a part of a spouse date night, or a family game night. They also are helpful after asking the “How was your day, dear?” question, as you come home from work or school. They are very effective in bringing the defensive walls down on relationship issues.