

Reflective Listening

“Listening looks easy, but it’s not simple. Every head is a world.”
Cuban proverb

Reflective listening is a primary skill in outreach. It is the pathway for engaging others in relationship, building trust, and fostering motivation to change. Reflective listening appears deceptively easy, but it takes hard work and skill to do well.

Sometimes the “skills” we use in working with clients do not exemplify reflective listening but instead serve as roadblocks to effective communication. Examples include misinterpreting what is said or assuming what a person needs.

It is vital to learn to *think* reflectively. This is a way of thinking that accompanies good reflective listening that includes interest in what the person has to say and respect for the person's inner wisdom. Its key element is a hypothesis testing approach to listening. What you think the person means may not be what they really mean. Listening breakdowns occur in any of three places:

- Speaker does not say what is meant
- Listener does not hear correctly
- Listener gives a different interpretation to what the words mean

Reflective listening is meant to close the loop in communication to ensure breakdowns don't occur. The listener's voice turns down at the end of a reflective listening statement. This may feel presumptuous, yet it leads to clarification and greater exploration, whereas questions tend to interrupt the client's flow. Some people find it helpful to use some standard phrases:

- “So you feel...”
- “It sounds like you...”
- “You're wondering if...”

There are three basic levels of reflective listening that may deepen or increase the intimacy and thereby change the affective tone of an interaction. In general, the depth should match the situation. Examples of the three levels include:

1. Repeating or rephrasing – listener repeats or substitutes synonyms or phrases; stays close to what the speaker has said
2. Paraphrasing – listener makes a major restatement in which the speaker's meaning is inferred
3. Reflection of feeling – listener emphasizes emotional aspects of communication through feeling statements – deepest form of listening

Varying the levels of reflection is effective in listening. Also, at times there are benefits to over-stating or under-stating a reflection. An overstatement (i.e. an amplified reflection) may cause a person to back away from a position while an understatement may lead to the feeling intensity continuing and deepening.

(Adapted from Motivational Interviewing materials by David B. Rosengren, Ph.D. and from Motivational Interviewing by Miller & Rollnick, 1991)