



## ACTIVE LISTENING

### COMMUNICATION AND THE LISTENING THERMOMETER

#### LISTENING TO YOURSELF AND THE OTHER PERSON; ASKING QUESTIONS, SPECIFYING, STRUCTURING AND SUMMARIZING

In this chapter we will discuss communication skills in general (like listening, asking questions, specifying, structuring, summarizing, relating, connecting). We will also concentrate on listening to yourself and the other with the help of the listening thermometer.

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### COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN GENERAL

#### 1.1 ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening is hearing what is being said, and sometimes hearing what is reflected behind the words.

Listening requires:

- Concentration
- Patience
- Focus
- Acceptance
- Empathy

Active or detectable listening invites the other person to reflect on his own situation. Your reactions will tell him that he is important to you, you want to hear and understand him.

Active listening means trying to understand what the other means, listening on a relational level. The other is invited and encouraged to share more precisely what concerns him. An atmosphere of trust is created. There is respect and acceptance in this way of listening.

Active listening is a way of listening or reading between the lines. The person listens and focuses on the unspoken or half spoken emotions and perceptions of the other person and rephrases them. The listener expresses what he feels might be the perception, emotion or need of the other. The listener doesn't really respond to the content of the message, but to what lies beneath, or what the listener thinks he hears.

Active listening is a way of telling your partner: "I listen to you, I hear what you say and I respect what you say. I try to understand you. What I hear, or what I think I hear, is an perception, a need that I accept and respect because it is your perception or need".

#### **Objective of Active Listening**

The objective of Active Listening is to help a conversational partner, if he has a personal problem that is emotional and sensitive, to recognize his own emotions, perceptions and needs, get a grip on them and to prevent them from blocking him in searching for a solution.

#### **Active Listening reactions**

Active Listening reactions can be:

- Indicate that you keep up with the other by means of a small response of understanding and encouragement
- Ask for clarification if you don't understand something (yet) or if something is confusing: "I don't quite follow you, can you please say that again"
- Paraphrase, also called repeating in your own words what you think the other is saying, and checking if you're correct: "Do you mean that you're not sure if they understand your proposal"



- Summarize the headlines and highlights of part of the conversation, while the other person can correct or add
- Review and rearrange the items that were mentioned separately but belong together, in order to give the other person a clearer picture of the problem
- Defining vague or general points:
 

Nobody cares for me	→	Who doesn't care for you?
Things never go my way	→	What doesn't go your way?
I'll just run away	→	From what do you run away?

## 1.2 ASKING QUESTIONS

By asking questions you can help the other person clarify and investigate his thoughts and feelings, and the way he handles his problems. You can also ask questions because you need more information to understand him. You can use questions to jump-start a conversation (again): "I notice that you find it hard to discuss this, what are you afraid of?"

By asking questions you can check if the other understands you. These and several other reasons to ask questions can be functional and helping. But sometimes questions are wrong or too much, and can feel like an interrogation. It's also possible that the other person expects an instant solution after so many questions.

Be careful with asking a lot of questions. Too many questions can lead to a certain pattern: the listener asks, the other answers. The hidden message is: I know it all, I know what's good for you. Try to be aware of the fact that you ask questions and why. Is it really necessary or are you trying to keep the conversation going? Try to listen to the questions that really bother the other. There are several types of questions, each with their own impact.

### Open questions

Open questions usually begin with a question word like who, what, how, when, where. When you ask an open-ended question, you allow the person with whom you are communicating to respond on his own level. He can respond in whatever framework or train of thought he is most comfortable. He can direct the conversation in any way he wants. Open questions help him to evaluate his own thoughts and feelings.

The result of open questions is that the conversation runs more fluidly: you express more interest and the other has room to expand more.

A simple and nice way to ask open questions is begin with: How ...? Who ...? What ...? Where ...? When ...? Examples:

- How do you feel?
- What are you thinking of?
- What do you think for yourself?
- What's happening with you?
- Who gives you that idea?
- When does that happen?

These questions are specially appropriate at the beginning of a conversations, if a new subject comes up, or if you want to know more about the feelings of the other person. This line of questioning is also just right when a conversation tends to get stuck or when someone is talking in circles. However, too many open questions can scare the other and give him the feeling to have to reveal himself too much. Alternating with closed questions can be sensible.

### Closed questions

Closed questions are very restrictive in that they either confirm or deny a specific issue. You dictate the course of the conversation. On the other hand, you can ask a closed-ended question to give the caller a moment, for example after an emotional story.

Sometimes it's just necessary, e.g. if you need information fast.

Examples:

- Have you made an appointment?
- Does it happen more often?
- Did you discuss this with your husband?

When you want to learn the opinion or feelings of the other person, closed-ended questions are not suitable. Closed questions have a risk of being manipulative or coercive. They can be suggestive. You push the other in a certain (your?) direction.

You can also get stuck in the conversation by asking too many closed questions. The other person can limit himself to short answers, so you have to come up with new questions again. You can't concentrate anymore on what he is saying.

### Verifying questions

Verifying questions are also closed questions, but these are mainly meant to check if you understood something. Verifying questions are also called paraphrases: it is similar to a summary. You restate *in your own words* what the other person has said, for example:

- So you're not sure if you should go to a doctor, right?
- Do I sense that you rather end the relationship?

### Suggestive questions

Suggestive questions are answers in the form of questions. The answer is already included in the question. So you ask for confirmation of your suspicion, your opinion. That's because you not only put information of the other person in your question, but also your own ideas. Examples of suggestive questions are:

- And now you feel guilty?
- I suppose you are very angry about that?
- I suppose you're afraid that it will never be right again
- You must love your mother very much

These questions provoke an answer, usually there is one obvious answer. The other person is forced to answer accordingly, so an inaccurate answer and therefore false information is likely. With these questions there is always the risk of thinking for the other person.

It's clear that in most conversations it is better not to ask suggestive questions. You can't take the risk of failure. Sometimes it is effective though, like when you have a certain feeling about the other person's problem and he doesn't mention it.

### Double questions

Double questions ask two things at the same time. If you are very curious about someone, you may be tempted to ask double questions.

For example:

- Do you live in the suburbs and what kind of work do you do?

Which of those two questions have to be answered first? This can cause confusion, so it's better to confine yourself to ask one question at a time. The other person can answer that question, without wondering what the other question was.

### Why questions

Asking for an explanation or a justification at the beginning of a conversation is hardly appropriate. A why question can cause defensiveness.

A lot of why questions can be transformed to how questions or what questions, that ask about feelings or perceptions of the other person, without causing feelings of violation.

'Why is that difficult' can become 'What is difficult about it?'



### Exploring questions

Exploring questions can bring the conversation to deeper level, but only after you've listened attentively. Asking more questions can help the other to say difficult things or stimulate him to reflect on himself.

For example:

- How do you mean ...?
- I hear anger in your voice, is that right?

### Comma questions

Comma questions are questions that make a comma out of the period at the end of a sentence.

Examples:

- I like this job better. , than ...?
- It's just the way it is. , because ...?
- I can't do that. , so ...?

## 1.3 RELATING TO THE OTHER

When communicating it is important to relate to the other person as best you can. The more you can level with the other, the better the connection. You can do this by:

- mimicking the position of the other
- using the same speaking pace
- matching each other's timbre
- matching each other's language
- trying to relate to the perception of the other person

You can use all these things in a regular conversation. And if you pay attention, you'll notice that you do so without realizing it. In a phone call you can't mimic the position, and in chats you can also not match the others timbre. So to better relate to the other in phone calls and chats it is necessary to emphasize the other possible methods to relate.

We perceive with our senses. But we need our individual being to add meaning to it: our experiences, memories, needs and efforts make us interpret what we see or hear. Our feelings can help us identify and empathize the feelings of others. But our feelings can also trick us. They can block our ability to identify the individual meaning of the other person.

Below are a number of examples in which the listener relates to the way the caller. Focus particularly on the text in italics.

- Lieke:            Difficult ... I'd like to *scream*...  
                      It's like I can't find *the words*...
- Listener:        Please try, say the first thing that comes to mind
- Lieke :            It's as if nobody ever listens to me, as if I'm plain stupid...
- 
- Lieke :            Difficult ... yet I *see* it very clearly...  
                      But I can't describe it
- Listener:        Please try, what do you *see*?
- Lieke :            It's like I'm in a thick *layer of fog*
- 
- Lieke:            Difficult ... yet a lot of things are *going through my mind*  
                      But I can't describe it
- Listener:        Try to describe what you *feel*?



Lieke: I *feel* terribly lonely

#### 1.4 STRUCTURING BY SPECIFYING AND SUMMARIZING

**Specifying** is clarifying vague messages or generalities:

Nobody notices me	→	who would you like to notice you?
I just can't do that	→	what's keeping you?
I can't take it anymore	→	what can't you take?

This is an active listening response to give a clearer picture of what is the real subject. Using comma questions can also be helpful:

Being at home is better.	,	than ...?
It's just the way it is.	,	because ...?
I can't do that.	,	so ...?

**Summarizing** is describing the essentials of the conversation in your own words followed by fact-checking. This skill is very important. There is a number of reasons to summarize frequently:

- The other person feels heard and understood
- He is stimulated
- Summaries give structure to a conversation and lines up everything for the other person (and for you)
- Summaries can reveal inaccuracies in your observation of the other
- Summaries encourage the other to be more detailed
- Summaries can calm the atmosphere and underline the importance of what's being said.

It goes without saying that someone feels understood if the other outlines the conversation in his or her own words. It speaks of the fact that you are observant and a good listener. Summaries help structure a conversation, which is important for both of you. When you listen with intent, you can't be busy with trying to find solutions, and it helps you keep track of the other's train of thought. Structuring allows the other to get a clearer picture of his own problems. If he is chaotic, summarizing helps structure the chaos.

When speaking of summarizing, it is important to distinguish between the **what** and the **how**, between the contents of what's being said, and the emotions that go along with that.

#### **Summarizing the content**

This means shortly describing in **your own words what** the other says about himself or the situation. The emphasis is on restating pieces of **substantive** information. This skill is also called paraphrasing.

The purpose is to:

- let the other know that you are paying attention. Moreover, it can be invigorating to someone to hear their own story in other words.
- check if you fully understand the other. It gives him a chance to correct inaccuracies.

In this context it is important to summarize in an assuming way of speaking.

#### **Pitfall**

You're not supposed to repeat exactly what the other person just said. It will make you sound like a parrot and chances are that the other doesn't feel being taken seriously.

If your conversational partner provides you with a great deal of information, you'll have to make a choice as to which part of the information you want to focus on. Sometimes you can recognize by the tone someone uses which is most important to him (e.g. more emphasis or a hesitation).

Here are a few starters for summarizing the contents:

- If I understand correctly, you're saying that ...



- So basically you say that ...
- You mean that ...

You might hear discrepancies in what the other tells you. You can point this out by saying, for example “On the one hand I hear you say ..., but on the other you say ...”.

In short: summarizing is intended to provide both caller/chatter and listener with a detailed picture of what the problem is and to bring structure to the conversation.

### Describing the emotion

This means focusing on the feelings that you notice with the other person. It’s also called ‘reflection of the feelings’. Asking *what* happened is usually not so hard. It is more difficult to express that you try to understand *how* the other person is feeling in that situation. Giving voice to the other’s feelings can bring the conversation to a deeper level, and can also quickly bring you to the heart of the problem. This way the describing of emotions is a specific way of expressing empathy. By focusing on the other’s emotions, whatever they may be, you share that you accept them. This may open the door for the other to feel more comfortable in expressing his feelings.

There are several ways for someone to express how he feels:

- With words (verbally), using words expressing emotions, like scared, nice, boring, disappointed, sad, etc.
- Without words (non-verbally), e.g. by means of posture, signs of strain, glancing down, blushing, talking fast, hard or soft. And important for conversations by phone or chat: the tone of voice and the speed of answering.
- Emoticons and other symbols from chat language

Usually there is a combination of verbally and non-verbally expressed feelings.

### How do you focus on these emotions?

- First you can acknowledge the you understand the emotions, e.g. “How sad for you”, “You sound relieved”, etc. Especially these kind of short sentences can make a personal connection. They bring people closer together.
- Second, if you are not quite sure of yourself, you can point out feelings with a suggestive tone of voice. E.g. “Am I to understand that you were disappointed?”, “Do I understand correctly that you are in fact very worried?”

Sometimes it’s hard to materialize feelings and emotions. Feelings often are shared in a vague way, which makes it hard to recognize them. In daily life feelings hardly ever are shared immediately. If feelings come to the surface, they often are experienced as a threat. Most people are tempted to suppress their feelings and emotions, they rather concentrate on the fundamental side of the problem. Yet feelings are an important part of live, and if you don’t pick up on them, it may seem like you haven’t noticed the most important things someone said.

Here are two examples of the difference between summarizing the content and describing the emotions:

“It started when I got up this morning: just as I left home it started pouring and I didn’t bring my coat”

**Summarizing the content:**

You just headed out and it started raining

**describing the emotions:**

And you hated that?

“I’m not sure which vacation to choose, there are endless possibilities.”

**Summarizing the content: describing the emotions:**

So your problem is choosing

You are full of doubt?

And finally:

- An important part of summarizing is not to bring up new ideas



- Summarizing regularly increases the natural flow of a conversation, with a beginning, a middle and an ending. Finishing the conversation will be simple.

## 2 THE LISTENING THERMOMETER

### The essence of listening

Listening is paying attention and giving time to the story of someone else, and therefore has more to do with 'giving' than 'receiving'.

Listening is giving what is necessary to gain someone's trust: attention, respect and interest.

Attention, because you're making an effort to go beyond your own perception and focus on the other.

Respect, because you're listening with the awareness that in essence every human being is equal.

Interest, because you'll do everything in your power to make a connection with the other and what motivates him.

As a listener you are sensitive to the other, you consider what he says, you allow to be touched. If you listen carefully, you will come to appreciate the other and his story.

Listening is mainly: acknowledging.

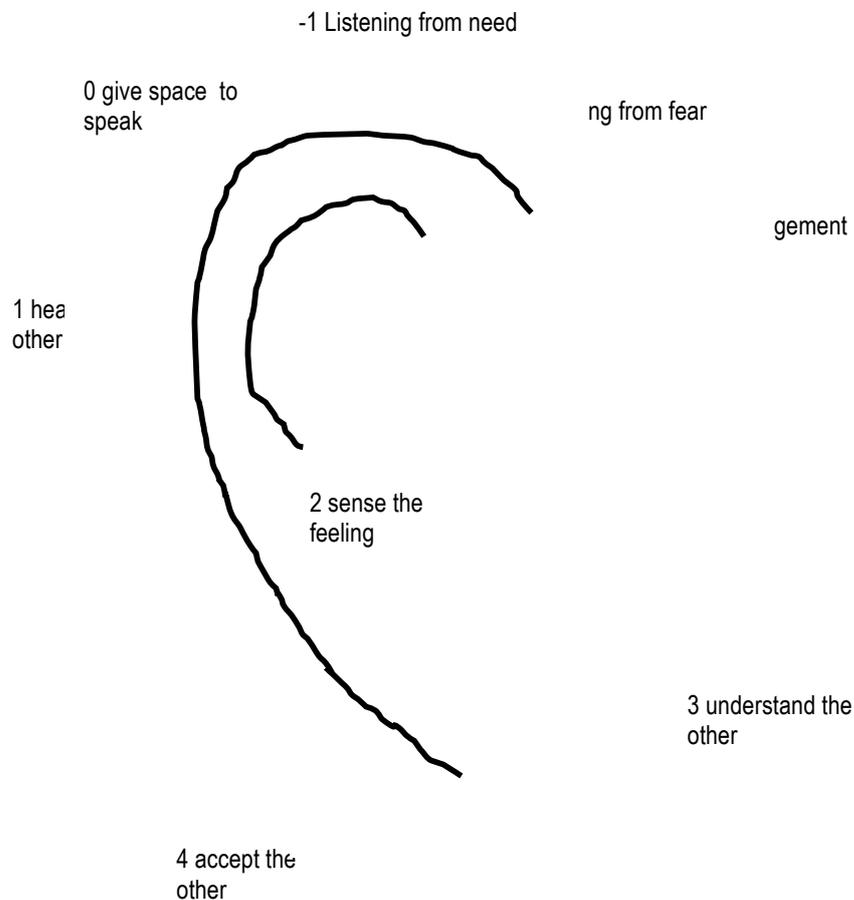
When you sense that someone is not listening to you, you realize that really listening is a gift. If the other is not listening to you, he or she chooses not to give and you'll get the feeling that something is taken from you. Note: This doesn't only apply to listening to someone else. It also applies to listening to yourself. You can lose being in touch with (parts of) yourself if you don't acknowledge what is happening deep inside you. You'll take something away from yourself.

### 2.1 LEVELS OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

	Level of acknowledgement	What do you give?	How do you give that?	Result
0	Give someone space to speak	Space to speak	Invite to speak, agreeing sounds, don't interrupt, ask a question every now and then	The other feels invited to continue, to say more
1	Hear what the other says	The experience of being heard	Repeat the contents: Repeat or rephrase what the other says	The message becomes clearer
2	Sense the feeling	The experience of empathy	Restate the contents and show the feeling: repeat or rephrase what the other says and rephrase his feelings	The other is confirmed in his feelings
3	Understand what the feeling refers to	The experience of being understood	Return what you hear about the other	The other is confirmed in what is important to him
4	Accept the other the way he is	The experience of being accepted	Return what you hear about the other, in a constructive way	The other is confirmed in his uniqueness as a human being



## 2.2 THE LISTENING THERMOMETER



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- |          |   |   |
|----------|---|---|
| <b>0</b> | <b>Give space to speak</b>  | How: be inviting (agreeing), sounds, asking   |
| <b>1</b> | <b>Use the space to really hear what the other is talking about</b> | How: repeat in your own words what the other says, ask questions                                  |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Sense the feeling with which the other speaks</b>                | How: point out and reflect on feelings  |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Understand what is behind the feeling</b>                        | How: ask questions, be interested, express sympathy, point out feelings                           |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Accept the other the way he is</b>                               | How: Listen beyond all judgement, allow him to be different, fully meet and acknowledge the other |

The 'warmer' you listen, the more you feel an actual connection. In reality 'warm' listening is not quite that simple. There are pitfalls, and there is 'cold' listening:

### -3 Listening with judgement



We hardly ever listen without judgement, the first impression provides an image. Then there's autobiographic listening, we search for confirmation from our own judgements and opinions

**-2 Listening from fear**

Listening means giving up control, you don't know how to respond, you don't know if you can help, you're afraid of emotions (your own or from the other) you're afraid of criticism

**-1 Listening from need**

The need to do something, solve or show positive signs, the need not to listen (e.g. to whining or complaining), the need for acknowledgement, gratitude, being heard yourself, the need for control

It's cold when you listen with judgement, with fear or your own needs. You can raise the temperature by really focusing on the other, being curious: who is he?

How can you warm up 'cold' listening?

- From judgement, through recognizing needs, to interest
- From fear to doing exactly what you're afraid of
- From needs, through recognition, to pointing out needs or leave them for a while

### 2.3 LISTENING TO YOURSELF

'Warm' listening to someone can be obstructed by your own inner voices. For example, you speak with someone with self-harm behaviors, but in the meantime you can have thoughts like:

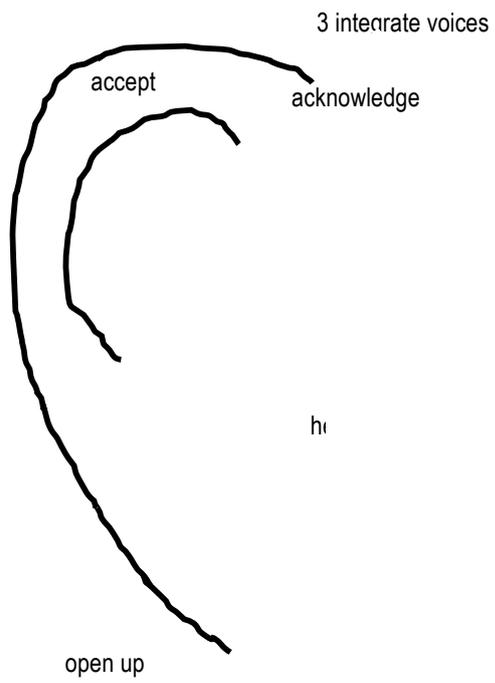
- he should stop this acts of self-harm!
- what's going to happen if he cuts himself really bad?!
- what is my responsibility if it goes wrong?!
- I have to help him now!

These thoughts are called 'voices'. The voice that expresses what you think, hope, feel, want and who you are. There is a whole range of voices within yourself and others. Listening comprises acknowledging all these voices, so not only the voices that are at the forefront.

If you learn to be welcoming to every voice, they will all have their own space. Sometimes just in thought, but it's also possible to bring it up in the conversation. In line with the previous example for instance, you can say:

- it scares me a little that you harm yourself ... or:
- I wonder if anything bad is going to happen, can you imagine? or:
- I feel the need to try to keep you from harming yourself ... or:
- it bothers me to have this conversation, knowing that you harm yourself, so I'd appreciate it if you'd stop.

Your voices matter and need acknowledgement. By giving yourself that acknowledgement you can better listen to yourself. By connecting to your inner voices you will be more able to practice 'warm' listening. You will be more authentic in the conversation, without being something that you're not.



1. Survey  
hear in a

voices  
Which voices do you  
conversation?

2. Identify voices

Give space to the voice you really don't want to hear  
(your shadow side)  
Which emotions are there?  
Which values are involved?

3. Integrate

voices Give words to your voices, emotions and values.

2.4 COLD LISTENING: THE PITFALLS

Here are some examples of 'cold' listening. These are pitfalls in a conversation without warm listening.

1. Minimizing

Some callers can make a big drama out of a small problem. A pitfall is putting things in perspective, downplaying immediately. By doing this, you're not in line with the perception of the other and



you're denying his problem. Something may seem small to you, but for the other it can be a huge problem. So be careful with downplaying. You can help someone see the relevance of something, but usually in a later stage of the conversation. Make sure to ask open questions, like: "The way you tell me, it sounds like a huge problem, is that right? What happens if ... ? What will be the consequences if ...?"

## 2. Thinking for the other

When someone is experiencing the loss of a family member, chances are that he is sad. But that won't always be the case. People can be happy or relieved that someone is dead, and they often feel shame to talk about it. In that case the listener can be of assistance, since the threshold is very low to get in touch with an anonymous helpline. Don't jump to conclusions in thinking that you understand the situation of the other. In doing so, you apply your own thoughts to the situation of the other. In the above mentioned example, your response can be: "I feel for you that you have lost [family member]. How do you feel about it?" Don't be afraid to ask questions. If you struggle with direct questions or if you have a strong clue (e.g. you hear someone cry), you can also ask: "[family member] passed away and you are very sad about it, is that right?" You may make a suggestion, but you do leave the option for correction open. Give the other space to react and correct if you're wrong.

## 3. Diagnosing

During the conversation you might recognize symptoms from a certain condition or illness. Asking questions in order to place someone in a certain category is a pitfall. Although it can give you a feeling of control: "It's just someone with autism and they always behave like this ...", it prevents you from listening and focusing on what the other is saying. There is no point in labelling the other person. You are not a therapist in this conversation. Try to put yourself in the world of the other person in order to be able to listen 'warmer'.

## 4. Conversation through the diagnose-solution model

In some conversations there is a tendency to research the situation in detail. The idea is: the more you know about the situation, the better the solution that can be presented. This is the pattern for the diagnose-solution model. Some callers are pushing for this kind of pattern: they tell you as much as possible about their background or the context, motivated by the need for your opinion or advice. Going along with this is a pitfall. You can't make an objective judgement about the situation, and you are not supposed to! Even if the caller asks you if he's on the right track, you can't really say much about it. The reason is, that you only hear/read one side of the story. Even if you ask a lot of questions, your perception of the situation will be limited. So avoid the pattern of the diagnose-solution model. You are not 'the doctor' in this conversation. Put the ball back in the court of the other. The opinion of the listener is not important; ask the other what he feels about it. It's also not important what the listener would want in given situation; ask the other what his objective is. He is his own expert on the problem, he is responsible. Again, trying to find a diagnose or solution for the other is an example of 'cold' listening.

## 5. Filling silences

Some conversations need some time to get started. Silences can occur, which is sometimes uncomfortable. But it is also a chance for the other to gather his thoughts. People who are uncomfortable during a silence, have a tendency to ask a lot of questions just to fill the silence. The risk is that the other feels limited room and is only answering questions instead of telling his own story. It will then feel more like an interview or even a bombardment of questions and not like a real conversation. Silence is something that is meant to be *shared* not *filled*.

## 6. Making a judgment



How does it feel when the other is proud to tell you that he slept with 100 women? In many instances the other will trigger you to form an opinion. Morals and values will influence the way you react in a conversation. This can also prevent you from warm listening. You shouldn't try to suppress or deny your own opinion. For good listening you also need to listen to your inner voices. Try to realize that both perspectives can coexist. You can have your opinions, the other can have his. That way you avoid making a judgement. However, no judging doesn't mean you can't set (legal) boundaries. For instance, it's ok to say: "Hitting is not allowed, it is against the law. Are you aware of that?".

### **7. Excessive involvement**

Some stories can trigger recognition or pity. You hear something that you've experienced yourself as well. You want to keep the other from making the same mistakes you did, or you want to give the advice that helped you at the time. The involvement you feel can be too strong, and become an obstacle for listening. The commitment you normally feel that is just right for warm listening, is then counterproductive. Your own inner voices prevent you from active listening. Keep some distance between yourself and the other in order to stay in control.

Source: Elementary course Sensor 2016, module 3, verbal communication 3.2. Theory Listen thermometer.  
(from the book: Harthorend, "Heart of hearing", Harry van de Pol, 2010)