



Wings of Hope Hospice

Being a Healing Listener

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Healing Listening

'Healing listening,' a term used by both James Miller and Paul Feider in their writing and their work with individuals who are grieving, is a priceless gift you can give someone who has experienced a loss. Regardless of the type of loss, the person experiencing it feels pain, and that pain must be expressed. The loss must be mourned.

There are many ways to mourn a loss. Healing listening supports those who choose to express their pain by talking about it. It is a way to help another carry the burden of their grief for a short time so they can rest. Healing listening validates the other person and acknowledges their pain.

Creating a Healing Environment

The ideal healing environment is quiet, serene and private. It is a place where the grieving person feels comfortable and safe. There are no interruptions – no phone, computers or televisions. There may be soothing music playing or soft sounds of nature in the background.

Grief, however, can have an ambushing quality about it. A sudden rush of tears can occur over espresso in a crowded coffee house. A healing environment can still be created by making the grieving person the absolute center of your attention, regardless of the other sounds around you. It is possible to exude calm in the middle of chaos, and this is what a grieving person needs. Eye contact, perhaps holding a hand or offering a tissue can support another in a public setting.

Acceptance

Acceptance is helpful on many levels. Accept that your friend, loved one or co-worker is forever changed by his or her loss. The loss cannot be undone, and you cannot 'fix' it. Grief is not a problem to be solved but rather an experience to be felt. Although the person you knew before the loss is gone, the person they are now may desperately need to be heard.

Love the grieving individual as a fellow human being. Respect that the pain they are experiencing is real to them, even if you don't understand it or it seems inconsequential to you. Hold the feeling of being non-judgmental even if you disagree with something.

Silence - A Nurturing Cushion

Most people struggle with periods of silence in a conversation. It can feel awkward, as though something – anything – should be said. Silence, however, can be nurturing to a grieving person. Silence gives them time to feel what they feel or to gather their thoughts. If you don't

know what to say, often, saying nothing is best. Watch the other person. They are likely so caught up in their pain that they aren't aware of the silence. They might be using it to rest or to remember. Allow them that. Just because neither of you is talking doesn't mean nothing is happening. Sitting in silence gets easier with practice.

Body Language in Healing Listening

Sit comfortably in a way that is natural to you. Be aware that the grieving person may perceive you don't want to be present or listen to them if your arms or legs are crossed. Try to keep your body language consistent with the tone of what the other is expressing. Leaning forward a little can indicate interest. Sitting back in your chair can say to the other person you are not concerned about time. In some cultures, eye contact can show a deep caring. It may be appropriate to sit side by side and share a view during a conversation. Occasional nods acknowledge that you are still listening. Some people like to be touched and find hand-holding or hugging comforting. If you aren't sure about touching someone, ask them. Above all, your body language needs to be calming to the other person.

Gentle Curiosity

Sometimes questions can be helpful to draw the grieving person out a little. Being genuinely curious about what the experience is like for them can be validating. Avoid asking 'why' questions as these might create feelings of defensiveness.

- How do you get through the day?
- What's happening inside you right now?
- How are things going for you? (better than how are you doing?)
- What has this loss been like for you?
- Tell me about him/her. What did you love most about this person?
- What has been most difficult for you?

Do and Don't

Do let your tears fall if you are genuinely moved by something you hear. It can be validating to the grieving person. Don't take on their feelings or lose the boundary between you and the person to whom you are listening. If you do express your authentic feeling, don't let it become the center of attention.

Do listen for themes or for what is not expressed. The grieving individual may feel lost in the details of their experience or the pain may be too great and fragmented for them to notice something larger. Don't give advice. Don't interrupt.

Do let the grieving person repeat himself or herself. Sometimes the pain is not expressed to its fullest extent the first time. Don't tell them you've already heard something.

Do understand your own needs so you can attend to them and not have them met by the grieving person. Don't tell 'your story.' Don't compare losses.

The Role of the Healing Listener

Know that you cannot fix the other. This is not what is needed. Your role is to create a healing environment in which the other can mourn.

Common Struggles in Healing Listening*

- Labeling conversations as “good” (it’s easy to assume that if it’s a very deep discussion, the person was helped) or “poor” (it’s easy to assume that if it’s a surface discussion, it was not very “helpful” to the person) and trying to create “good discussions.”
- Desiring to “fix” people or give advice.
- Responding to everything a grieving person says and responding immediately.
- Experiencing feelings of anxiety/uncertainty if one is not “doing something” such as responding frequently.
- Difficulty sitting in silence with another person and trusting that more may be communicated without words/beyond words than in anything verbalized.
- Difficulty trusting that the natural healing process is at work in its own time and in its own way even though it cannot be seen.

*Common Struggles list developed by Robert Bos, M.Div.

Sources:

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