



The Power of Empathetic Listening

By Bob Baker

Director, Colorado Marriage Project

One of the most powerful gifts we can give to our marital partner is what we call “connected listening.” It is otherwise known as empathetic listening. As one who has counseled with hundreds of couples over the past 30 years, I often hear a familiar refrain from both men and women: “I don’t think my wife/husband really understands how a feel about this. They just don’t seem to get it.” This common feeling among married partners can be significantly reduced when a couple regularly incorporates “connected listening” into their interaction with one other.

What exactly are we talking about? The Bible addresses this topic by simply saying in Rom 12:15-16:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.
Be of the same mind toward one another....”

In the popular *New Living Translation*, actually a paraphrase, it reads like this: “When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow. Live in harmony with each other....”

Empathetic listening can be defined as a two-level process. First, it means to:

- See the world through your partner’s eyes
- Set aside your own thoughts, judgments and solutions
- Focus on your partner’s words, tone of voice, and body language
- Enter into your partner’s pain or other emotional state
- Share the gift of a life victory

Secondly, having done this, it requires the transmission to your partner—in an effective way—that you are in touch with “their world” on the specific topic at hand. It requires both the conscious choice to look at a life situation through the eyes of your partner and then to act on what you discover by reflecting it back to them in a way that confirms that you understand. This is why we call it “connected listening.”

Connected listening does not come naturally for many of us. In fact, for most men that I know, it is totally counter-intuitive and seemingly at odds with our God-given instinct to provide a practical, immediate solution to our partner’s problems. In short, we love to fix things, especially our wives. Although it will seem to most men that empathetic listening is a very slow and unduly complicated way to respond to a problem our wife is experiencing, we have found that the consistent practice of connected listening (especially by a husband) actually “fixes” the wife’s problem much better and sometimes even faster than a husband’s well-reasoned, logical suggestions. As a man, this writer finds that result rather amazing.

“Empathy is first an issue of choosing to soften your heart toward what your partner may be feeling and then letting them know you have done so.”

Extensive research by marriage educators and scholars has shown many, life-changing benefits of empathetic or “connected” listening. Here are a few of those benefits:

- It produces a powerful booster to your partner’s ability to grow and cope with problems
- It opens the door to mutual understanding
- It builds emotional trust between the speaker and the listener
- It richly enhances true conflict resolution
- It fosters a sense of couple “closeness” or “connectedness”

“The best way to get your partner to talk is to listen.” — Patty Howell & Ralph Jones

For those of us who find it difficult to enter into empathetic listening, it is helpful to identify some of the common “potholes” into which we may unintentionally fall. These are ineffective, yet often well intended, substitutes for empathetic listening:

- Stating that you have gone through something quite similar, totally understand, etc.
- Offering solutions and “good” advice
- Shifting into fact-gathering mode by asking too many questions
- Offering an “objective” perspective based on logic and reasoning
- Suggesting that there may be a more “holy” way to respond

“One of the by-products of Connected Listening is to cut in half the emotional pain of your partner and to double the joys of life.” — Bob Baker

Here are some examples of “connected listening” responses that may help to prime your pump:

- “Wow, no wonder you’re feeling that way.”
- “Boy, how difficult that must have been....”
- “I can see (or hear) you had a really hard day...want to talk about?”
- “Oh, wow, really...” “Gee, that must have been tough...”
- “How did you get through that?”
- “How did it go today with your project review?”

A Suggested Exercise: On your next date night, you might try this little exercise (designed to avoid the deeper waters by focusing on something outside your own relationship):

Ask your partner to share with you a difficult or hurtful experience that happened outside of your relationship (work incident, strain in a friendship, relationship with children, a disappointment, etc.). Listen intently with no distractions and then try your hand at playing back how you think that situation may have made your partner feel. Then, ask your partner how well you did in accurately capturing how they felt about the topic at hand. Be willing to accept at face value (without judgment, criticism, adjustment, or suggestions for change) how your partner viewed and/or reacted to the situation. You will have passed the test if your partner simply feels you saying: “I’m so sorry you had to go through that challenge. I know it was difficult.”

Several years ago, a friend of mine invited me to share an extremely difficult series of interconnected events I had been experiencing. It involved an unexpected career change, isolation from close friends, a sense of personal betrayal, and some major health issues that all converged within a few months. After hearing all the gory details for about an hour, my friend simply said: “No wonder you’re feeling so bummed out!” Those were some of the most powerful words I have ever received. Why? Because my friend had entered into my world and then let me know he understood my pain. No correction, no sermon, no lecture, no “shame on you” etc. Just: “No wonder!” That is connected listening.

“In Old Testament days, God permitted a Writ of Divorcement due to the “hardness of heart” that he saw in relationships. The opposite of hard-heartedness, is soft-heartedness. One of the best ways to demonstrate genuine soft-heartedness is through empathetic listening. Therefore, it must be among the top Divorce Busters.”