

Hearing Versus Listening

Understanding the Difference

Listening—and listening well—is the most important skill for success in life, as well as in patient care. Did you know that listening is one of the most important things that a patient values in a practice? Knowing that, how many of us really listen well? In our experience, most of us only “hear” what others say about 25 percent of the time. Don’t believe us? Ask your spouse, kids, or practice team, and they will tell you how well you listen to them! Listening isn’t just about whether you are *hearing* someone well, it’s about whether the person who’s talking to you *believes* you truly hear him or her. That’s where listening skills move way beyond just hearing skills.

But it’s not easy—listening well most of the time requires focus and care. Do you think it would be beneficial to improve this skill? For the next three weeks, choose one patient each day with whom you are most likely to achieve a positive result, and practice a new listening skill with that patient. Forget about the ineffective processes you may now have in place—they are merely habits. Here’s how to replace them with better listening habits.

Acknowledging the problem

The first step to improving your listening skills is simply hearing yourself and becoming aware of ways in which you do not listen. In their book *Are You Really Listening? Keys to Successful Communication*, Paul J. Donoghue, PhD, and Mary E. Siegel, PhD, cite four non-listening behaviors:

- Defending
- “Me Too” Identifying
- Advice Giving
- Judging the Speaker

Add these common handicaps to the disruptions, time demands, and stress that occur in your average dental practice and it’s amazing that anyone communicates! And, if you think it’s hard for you to listen, just think how hard it is for your patient to listen to you!

Here’s the good news: Listening well accomplishes better results *quicker!* For example, is it possible that you may be overwhelming your patient with technical details about which they don’t even care? Most dentists easily could cut 30 minutes or more of unneeded discussion out of their day if they responded more specifically to the question the patient actually asked. Best of all, your patient would feel that he or she was heard.

Applying the skills

How do you listen better? Try these tips:

1 Take a vacation from yourself. Put the focus on the other person and what he or she needs to share with you. People won’t hear you until you hear them first. Or, as the saying goes, “Seek first to understand, then be understood.” Give your patient feedback that helps him or her clearly understand that you heard his or her concerns. Use paraphrasing skills to really understand your patient’s goals. Keep your eyes and ears completely focused on the patient in front of you. Avoid anticipating what the patient will say next.

2 Pay attention to your time. Be sure that you are extremely focused on listening to the patient from the minute you walk into the exam room. It’s easier to stay tuned if you start out that way. If you have someone who is too much of a talker, start with, “It’s good to see you again today. Since our time together is limited, may we start our discussion with your most important concern?” It’s a polite way to let the patient know that you want to help him or her but that he or she needs to get to the point quickly.

3 Hear all of the patient’s concerns and questions. Your team can help summarize this information, too. Pull it all together with something like, “So it sounds like you are tired of having food trapped in those spaces, and you are having trouble keeping the area free of plaque and debris. Were you



hoping to fix this space with something you take in and out of your mouth or something that stays in place and functions like your natural teeth?"

4 Wait for a response. It's a natural tendency to keep going before the patient has time to process what you've just asked. Depending upon the answer, a further response might be, "In order to give you what you want, we can either place an implant tooth or a fixed bridge. What are your thoughts?"

5 Pause and listen. Let the patient ask questions. Remember to use silence in the interaction. We often become uncomfortable with silence due to our own insecurity. Quiet moments are a respectful way to allow your patient to think. Even better, when you are quiet, you will listen better.

6 Watch your patient's body language and tone of voice. Often the real truth is more clearly represented in how we say what we say. You may need a more specific response, but if providing additional information will not prove useful, it's best to say something that doesn't judge but instead merely reflects what you sense the patient might be feeling. By using the skills that we've presented, you may notice that people often solve their problems when they are able to clearly hear themselves.

You also can practice your skills by listening to your team. Without announcing your plans, give one team member five minutes each day of focused listening. Your job is to listen and learn. No judgments or problem solving. Ask questions, then share with the staff person what you think you heard. You might be surprised about how much you didn't clearly hear.

A two-way street

If you listen, there's no need to talk your patients "into" dentistry. Listen to their concerns, questions, and goals. While listening can be a difficult skill to develop, it is a skill that will bring you better relationships, happier patients, more referrals, and the chance to do more of what you have been trained to do. ♦



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Vinny Mayher, DMD,
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