

The Listening Cure

It would seem to me that the majority of soap opera plots are based around misunderstandings or poor communication between the key characters. So often we see character A has got the wrong end of the stick, while character B has misunderstood what A was trying to do, or character C has conveyed the wrong information to both A and B, causing some sort of impasse between the two. As the viewer, privy to the backgrounds of the various characters and perhaps the contexts in which they are behaving, it is often with frustration that we can see the unnecessary, usually unhappy outcomes unfold. Perhaps this is why I rarely watch soaps these days - I just want all the characters to sit down and properly talk things through – and very importantly, to be willing to listen to one another. However, in soaps this rarely happens, largely because it would spoil the drama of the storyline.

We often hear of talking cures or therapies and the old adage that “a problem shared is a problem halved,” suggesting that people certainly find benefit from talking about their problems or worries. In my various roles, but notably in my profession as a counsellor, this is something I frequently witness. I also value being able to talk things through in my personal life and through belonging to professional groups, which support me in my work. However, with all this focus on talking, perhaps sometimes we underemphasise the other vital ingredient in the equation – while one person talks, someone else must listen. This isn’t always as easy as it sounds and even as a qualified counsellor of many years experience, I sometimes have to remind myself to listen more and talk less. Sometimes, someone begins to speak to us and we’ve heard her words, but we’ve not listened. We’ve already decided what they plan to say, what we want them to say, or what we don’t want to hear – perhaps even what we can’t hear – at least not right now. Thus from the start we are closed off to what the other is really trying to communicate to us. Understandably, no one can always be 100% receptive to listening – our own heads might be full of thoughts, plans, too much to do, we are in a hurry. Perhaps we are also resistant to hearing something challenging or upsetting that we feel we can’t deal with in the present? Alternatively, perhaps what we are being told is so outside of our own experience, or personal perspective, it requires more time or contemplation to connect with? Or perhaps we ourselves haven’t felt heard and so put up a barrier to understanding the other side’s viewpoint? These situations often result in us becoming stuck and unable to help the other person or our relationship with them. There might be a lot of talking, but not a lot of listening and connecting.

I believe the parent-child relationship is fertile ground for miscommunications, which can sometimes mask the love that exists on both sides. Often, when a young person’s sad feelings are misunderstood, or not really heard, they can quickly escalate into angry or self-destructive ones. Young people in particular, frequently not only often find it difficult to know how they are feeling and why, but also to have the words to describe all of this, adding to the frustration of their situation. Of course, at times, this can make it more challenging for the listener to remain attentive and emotionally open for long enough to receive their message, particularly if there are other distractions or pressures. Additionally, as a society we are quick to label people “attention seekers” when they present us with difficult or unusual behaviours. We are often encouraged (I believe erroneously) to ignore “attention seeking” behaviours – then they will go away (supposedly)! However, what if these “attention-seeking” behaviours are an “attention-needing” communication of, “Please someone help, notice, listen.... even if I don’t yet know what is wrong, or what I need to say?” If “attention-needing” behaviours are ignored, a young person will surely be propelled to find other, potentially more extreme, ways to be heard? I am not claiming to always be a perfect listener in my own personal life. Like anyone, I can feel tired, distracted or impatient. However, so often I’m then reminded how a little more patience listening can be much more powerful than any words I might say, leading to a more helpful and peaceful outcome all round.

Spring break has arrived, allowing more time for many of us to spend with immediate family, extended relations and friends. Inevitably, while this closeness can be a wonderful thing, it can also bring up family conflicts, historic and current. Soap operas are popular because they do mirror reality and are distortions of our own difficult circumstances. However, by simply listening more, perhaps we can all try to aim for better outcomes than the soaps’, with faster resolution of some of the more avoidable conflicts. Happy holidays everyone!