

Listening With All Our Senses

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Top-rated speakers who presented at the 2008 Annual International ICF Conference in Montréal have been invited to submit articles to include in the Coaching World newsletter. Each article will be on the same topic that presenters focused on at the 2008 conference. This article is based on the popular education session “Listening to Bodies: Using the Wisdom of the Body for Telephone Coaching.”

When we listen with all our senses, conversations and the happenings of every day life can be amazing and transformative.

It is possible to listen to what our clients' bodies are expressing, even when their words are saying something else. And we can do this even when working via telephone. For example, “I want to be respected and understood by my colleagues” may be spoken by someone who isolates himself, is disconnected from associates, critical of himself and others. His colleagues say that he barely looks at people, moves fast, and is rigid in his torso—not very inviting. The actions of his body speak louder than his words. How can we listen with the wisdom of our own bodies? Begin by observing how your body responds as you listen with all your senses.

What might you observe about your body as you listen to a person like this? Where do you begin to contract, feel constrained, or rigid? Your body and all your senses are sources of information and wisdom that can help you interpret the shifts required to help your clients expand their way of being, so their actions become congruent with the outcome they desire.

We normally assume that we listen to words. A study at the University of California in 1991, however, indicated that only seven percent of a communication is the choice of words; 93 percent is conveyed through body language and tone of voice (*Communication Education*, 1991). So how do we listen to not only the seven percent, but the other 93 percent as well? Can we and do we actually use all of our senses to listen deeply? We can educate and train ourselves to listen with full awareness, using all our senses to “hear” and interpret what others are conveying.

Listening Validates Speaking

We speak to be listened to. Therefore, listening validates the speaker. Studies indicate that simply listening with full presence validates the speaker to a point that stress and frustration can be relieved, general well being can be improved, and relationships can be mended and revitalized. Therapists and doctors have reported that significant progress and healing can happen by listening deeply, even when the listener does not say or do anything else (*The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction*, 2006; *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 1995).

We normally assume that to listen to other people we just need to expose ourselves to what they say: be with them, talk to them, ask questions and listening will simply happen. For listening deeply, this is not enough. “Saying does not ensure listening...the phenomenon of communication in human beings depends not on what is transmitted, but on what happens to the person who receives it,” wrote biologist Humberto Maturana (*The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, 1987).

Even though it is biologically rooted and rests on the phenomenon of hearing, listening is much more than hearing. Listening pertains to the domain of language, which is constituted in our social interactions with others. What differentiates listening from hearing is the fact that when we listen we bring forth a world

of interpretation. Listening always implies interpretative understanding. When we ascribe an interpretation to a sound, we move from just hearing to the phenomenon of listening. We can listen when there are no sounds. Silence, gestures, breathing, body postures and movements all can and are interpreted.

When we learn to be centered, present, and fully available, we can listen to another person with all our senses: seeing their bodies (if we are with them in person) or other images, hearing their voice, observing what their speaking and presence produces in us by noting how we feel, what we smell, and even sometimes what we taste. The more you practice becoming aware of what all your senses are perceiving, the more deeply you will listen. When we listen with all our senses, conversations and the happenings of every day life can be amazing and transformative.



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