



**Setting an Intention to Listen with Empathy
presented by Jennifer Grau, President
Grau Interpersonal Communication
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**A webinar in preparation for
the International Listening Association's
September 17, 2020 celebration of**



INTERNATIONAL DAY OF LISTENING

We regret the recording from this session is not available and hope this document captures the essence of the experience.

Whether you attended this session and seek a recap, or are simply curious about what was covered, this document contains **key insights (blue)**, and **actions (purple)** while providing context for what we experienced and covered (black) during this 1 hour empathic listening webinar.

This webinar is session 3 in a series of 5 mini-workshops. It builds on the work of Sheila Bentley and Margarete Imhoff and therefore I started with the assumption that you have decided / determined empathy is an appropriate conversational response and you are looking to create and sustain an empathic intent as you listen.

The program opened with a story about my daughter, Shade, who experienced a bomb scare at work. When she told me about her day, and her role in discovering a suspicious package, instead of listening with openness, empathy, and curiosity, I jumped to rapid fire interrogation.

- **Listening with empathy is difficult, even for experienced listeners.**
- **Creating an intention to listen with empathy reminds us to start and stay empathic.**

When I realized my lack of empathy, I felt awful. Rather than ruminate on what a terrible parent I am or how I failed as a listening professional, I acknowledged I was not the listener I wanted to be and developed a plan to do better next time.

This story motivates me to listen with empathy. Maybe my story will inspire you too.

- **There is a difference between “I am a bad parent / listener” verses “I parented / listened poorly.” The second version leaves room for change. - Brenee Brown's work on the difference between shame and guilt.**

- Our capacity to be empathic and compassionate with others begins with self-empathy and self-compassion. - [Guy Winch](#)
- Develop a growth mindset. - [Carol Dwek](#)
- Show some grit, persist in developing an empathic listening habit. - [Angela Ductworth](#)

In this workshop we reviewed the following ideas from previous sessions:

1. Ambiguity related to naming emotion
2. Variability in perceiving emotional intensity
3. Physical and psychological indicators of emotion

We then explored:

1. Self-regulation techniques
2. Factors that support empathic listening
3. Behaviors, practices, and rituals that cue empathic listening
4. Tendencies and behaviors that block empathy
5. A way to replace empathy blockers with empathy cues

First, we revisit and build on Sheila Bentley's and Margarete Imhoff's ideas regarding the ambiguity of labeling emotions with a quick exercise that asked the group to identify emotions and intensity they heard.

What emotions might Shade have experienced during the bomb scare and at what intensity? (1 as low and 10 as high)

- fear 10,
- uncertainty 10,
- confusion 8

What emotions might I have experienced listening to the bomb scare and at what intensity? (1 as low and 10 as high)

- fear 6,
- relief 10,
- concern 3

People used a variety of words to describe our emotions. Most of the labels were "negative" however, there was not agreement. Similarly, there was disagreement in how intense the feelings were. The feeling labels and intensity ratings above are Shades and mine respectively.

- When providing empathy, use tentative language as your understanding of the emotion you perceive may differ from the speaker's experience.
- Emotions can be contagious. Listening to someone's feelings impact you.

How are you feeling right now?

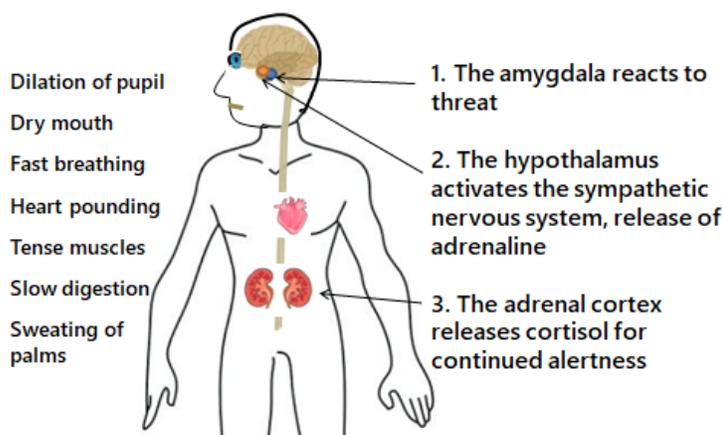
- anxious
 - threatened
 - tense
- When listening with empathy, it is especially important to start with you. Are you ready to connect? Are you centered, grounded, open, ready to “catch” what comes at you?

Because emotions can be contagious, we took a moment during the webinar for self-regulation to manage any residual distracting emotional energy generated by listening to the bomb scare story.

In our previous sessions, we explored two ways we experience our own emotions, physiologically and psychologically. We can self-regulate by focusing our attention in either or both areas.

Physiological Experience of Emotion – What do you notice happening in your body? To your heart rate, breathing, mouth, eyes?

The fight or flight response



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What helps you release emotional energy and get grounded? Take a moment to use any of the following strategies to center your energy and get ready to listen. Or share one of your own.

- take a moment and pause in silence
- try some slow deep belly breaths

- do a top of head to tip of toes body scan for muscle tension, tense and relax each muscle
- shake out tension
- shift posture

Psychological and Neurobiological Experience of Emotion – When we listen to others, our mirror neurons fire in similar ways as the speaker. Our hormones may also react similarly to the speaker’s, especially if the listener has had a similar experience. If you have experienced a bomb scare, your mirror neurons and hormones may be shaping your emotional experience right now.

What helps you release emotional energy and get grounded? Take a moment to use any of the following strategies to center your energy and get ready to listen. Or share one of your own.

- mantra – repeat “This is not about me”
- self-talk – repeat “There is no present danger or threat. I’m safe.”
- visualization – imagine you are in a calm, soothing, safe place.
- music – listen to soothing or enjoyable music.

Hopefully, you are now centered and ready to continue listening to learn.

What is an intention and why do you need one to listen empathically?

For the purpose of this webinar, we think about “intention” as an agreement we make with our selves about how we want to behave as a listener.

The primary purpose for setting an intention to listen with empathy is to prime the pump and remind us how we want to be and behave as a listener. This is important because empathic listening can be difficult, even for experienced and willing listeners.

- Develop an empathic listening habit by identifying a stimulus or cue, which prompts a desired response. Find a reward to reinforce the behavior - Charles Duhigg

Grau Interpersonal Communication did a listening training for Home Depot executives, and created a coffee mug as a visual reminder to cue their listening. We gave one to each participant. The mug had their logo and the mantra “Listen, empty your cup”.

- Create a mug with your favorite listening cue.

Another approach to listening invites us to use a metaphorical welcome mat before we listen. – Tamsin Hartley

- Cue listening by wiping away judgements and assumptions through wiping or shuffling your feet (mentally or physically) on the mat before listening.

Drawing further on Hartley’s work, another benefit of setting an empathic intension is to

- Tether the conversation and help both the speaker and listener find their way back to the listener's focus.

What supports your ability to set and maintain an empathic listening intention?

- Self-empathy and compassion
- Sufficient food, water, sleep
- Picking the right time/moment to listen
- A centering, focusing, self-regulation, or ritual

There are many thoughts, words, objects, routines that cue or remind us to make and maintain our intention to listen with empathy.

What techniques, behaviors or cues you to set and maintain an empathic listening intention?

- Write a list of your bias, advice, and judgements, then rip it up
- Put on a wrist band or rubber band
- Use a listening stone
- Create a listening sign on your shirt cuff, desk, or phone
- Before speaking ask myself WAIT (Why am I talking?)
- Pause for a moment of stillness
- Replace inquisitor questions with open ended, gentle curiosity – Jennie Grau
- Replace talking with finger squeezing - Ian Wang
- Replace judgement with surprise - Dick Halley
- Notice your body sensations and pause
- Take a moment of silence with a slow deep breath
- Repeat a mantra – “Listen, empty your cup”, “It isn't about me.” “Keep the ball in their court.”
- Use self-talk “I'm going to reflect my understanding and their emotion, not give advice.”
- Do a head to toes body check

If empathic listening were simple, we would do it more often. However, in addition to considering what cues empathic listening, we need to consider what gets in the way.

What blocks empathy? – We do!

Based on the list below and on the following page, consider what most regularly blocks your empathy.

EMPATHY BLOCKER

EXAMPLES

Downplaying	= Oh, don't cry. I'm sure it's not that bad! It's not the end of the world.
Denial	= There is nothing wrong; nothing for you to be upset about. Everything is OK.
Reasoning	= Don't cry. Can't you see that the other child didn't mean to hurt you?
The positive spin	= Look on the bright side. Can't you see, this probably happened for a good reason?
Cheering up	= Don't worry. Here, let me tell you something funny I heard the other day. Here, have an ice cream. That'll cheer you up.
Advising/giving options	= Why don't you try doing this, or that? I think you should just ignore that so-and-so.
The expectation	= You should have known better. Get over it. Don't let it get to you.
Put down	= Don't be silly. Don't be ridiculous.
Diagnosing/labeling	= You are being over-sensitive.
Distracting/diverting	= Hey, have a look at the pretty puppet.
Stealing the thunder	= Now you know how I felt when the same thing happened to me.

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Below are common conversational empathy blocking behavior that ignore or invalidate the speaker's emotions.

1. Making it about us – telling our own story, one ups, conversational hijack
2. Intellectualizing and evaluating - advice giving, judging, analyzing, problem solving
3. Curiosity run amuck - interrogating or quizzing
4. Making a mole hill out of a mountain - dismissing, placating or minimizing
5. Blaming or invalidating - denying, guiltning, shaming

Feel familiar? Select one empathy blocking behavior you want to replace NOT eliminate.

Stopping something is hard. Anyone who has tried to stop smoking or eating junk food will tell you it is easier to replace an undesirable behavior with a more desirable behavior than to simply stop doing the undesirable behavior.

By answering 4 questions, I was able to create an intention to listen with empathy.

1. What blocks or gets in the way of you listening empathically?
2. What empathy cue do you find appealing / helpful?
3. How will you remember to replace the empathy blocking tendency or behavior with an empathy cueing behavior?
4. What is your reward for making this change?

Here is an example of setting an empathic intention based on the bomb scare story coming from my desire to listen to my daughter with more empathy when I pick her up from work.

Jennie's Empathy Plan

1. What blocks or gets in the way of you listening empathically?
 - Empathy blocker – my fear and desire to protect leads to frantic interrogation rather than calm curiosity.
2. What empathy cue do you find appealing / helpful?
 - Empathy cue – mantra – “It’s not about me” and deep breathing.
3. How will you remember to replace the empathy blocking tendency or behavior with an empathy cueing behavior?
 - Action Plan -When I text her that I’ve arrived, I will take a few slow deep breaths and remind myself that when she describes her day “This is not about me.”
4. What is your reward for making this change?
 - Reward – I will have a deeper relationship with my child, I will model empathic listening. She may be more willing to listen to me.

Consider the questions below. Your goal is to replace the empathy blocker with an empathy cue.

1. What blocks or gets in the way of you listening empathically?
2. What empathy cue do you find appealing / helpful?
3. How will you remember to replace the empathy blocking tendency or behavior with an empathy cueing behavior?
4. What is your reward for making this change?

As with all new behaviors we want to become habits, with time and practice we to move through the learning cycle from:

- Unconsciously incompetent – we don’t know what we don’t know.
- Consciously incompetent – we know what we don’t know.
- Consciously competent – we can do this with effort and intention.
- Unconsciously competent – we do this automatically

I hope you gained insights about setting an empathic intention and discovered some new tools. Enjoy practicing and listening.

If you are interested in listening coaching, training or group facilitation, please contact me at jennifer@grauic.com. I look forward to listening to you!