Effective Listening: Five Lessons from the Best

ABSTRACT: For many nurses, especially when workloads are high, it can be difficult to listen carefully to patients. In federally mandated Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) surveys that help determine insurance reimbursement are asking patients how carefully their nurses listened. For Christian nurses, effective listening demonstrates the compassion, understanding, and care modeled by Jesus. An exploration of Jesus’ responses reveals five ways Christ effectively listened to people that can guide nurses.

KEY WORDS: active listening, empathy, HCAHPS scores, nursing, patient care

Sarah*, an oncology nurse with a caring, compassionate nature, rushes into the hospital to begin her shift. In years past, she remembers taking time to get to know her patients and their families. But today she finds the new electronic documentation system overwhelming and leaves patients’ rooms realizing she merely checks the boxes rather than giving patients her undivided attention. When she thinks about it, she realizes she often tunes out during conversations, unintentionally ignores nonverbal clues, and fails to demonstrate the compassion she wants to show as a nurse.

Nurses are faced with conflicting priorities, mounds of documentation, and higher patient loads. Many feel overwhelmed and rush from one activity to the next, focusing on the task at hand rather than the person. Instead of listening, some nurses find themselves in the role of an advisor, expressing their view and telling others what needs to be done, rather than seeking to understand. For example, as a nurse do you:
- Jump to conclusions and make hasty judgments;
- Interrupt others and/or finish their thoughts;
- Ignore or minimize nonverbal cues, or;
- Fake attention, instead of focusing on what patients are saying?

If so, you are not alone. Intellectually, we know that patients can feel confused, scared, and alone. We also understand how important it is for patients and families to receive comfort, acknowledgment, and significance. Yet it can be difficult to take time to listen carefully.

ARE YOU LISTENING?

Research and teaching in listening emphasize the critical importance of good listening (Watson & Barker, 2015; Watson & Barker, 2005). In healthcare, federally mandated Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) surveys are asking patients how carefully their nurses listened. These federal surveys contribute to determination of government insurance reimbursement (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2014). By being present and listening to patients, colleagues, and family members, nurses can ensure higher HCAHPS ratings. Furthermore, effective listening demonstrates the compassion, understanding, and care modeled by Jesus.

Even though nurses have been trained in basic active listening skills, the gift of listening is rare in today’s fast-paced environment. For nurses who want to show their concern, foster open dialogue, and be heard, there is much to learn through Jesus’ ministry and how he listened. Learning and applying the skills Jesus used can serve as a guide for Christian nurses, whose patients long to be heard.

In Matthew 11:15, Jesus implores: “Are you listening to me? Really listening?” Again in Mark 4:23, Jesus says, “Are you listening to this? Really listening?” Although these Gospel accounts depict Jesus as an effective listener, his listening behaviors, as recorded in the Gospel of John, are especially enlightening. Jesus says, “I’ve laid down a pattern for you. What I’ve done, you do” (John 13:15, The Message). Jesus’ listening skills serve as a practical model for applying his love today. By highlighting five of Jesus’ listening lessons, we learn how listening brings God’s love to others in personal relationships and ministries of care. These lessons help practicing nurses serve as God’s servants on earth.

Sarah* is president and founder of Innolect Inc., a global leadership and organizational development firm. She has published numerous books, articles, and training materials, and facilitates retreats on Listening as a Healing Ministry and Building Christian Community. She can be reached at Kittiew@innolectinc.com.

Kittie Watson is author of resources referenced in this article.

*Names changed to protect privacy.

DOI:10.1097/CNJ.0000000000000305

*Names changed to protect privacy.

Copyright ©2016 InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Unauthorized reproduction of this article is prohibited.

By Kittie W. Watson
LESSON 1: LISTEN TO GOD FIRST

The religion scholars and Pharisees led in a woman who had been caught red-handed in an act of adultery. They stood her in plain sight of everyone and said, “Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the Law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?” They were trying to trap him into saying something incriminating so they could bring charges against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the dirt. They kept at him, badgering him. He straightened up and said, “The sinless one among you, go first: Throw the stone.” John 8:3–7, The Message

Note that in this tense situation Jesus does not immediately respond. Instead of reacting, he thinks before answering. Nurses, too, before making rounds, entering a patient room, or responding to requests, can prepare to listen. Praying without ceasing allows God to listen and speak through us (Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17) and yet, the most important and yet, the most difficult listening skill to master.

During challenging situations, Jesus used silence to listen to God and what others were saying before responding. Jesus’ first lesson for us is: Listen to God first.

With time pressures, demanding shifts, and deadlines, many people rush to speak, give advice, react to comments, or share experiences without thinking of the consequences. It is during times of silence that we are best able to listen to God’s admonition, encouragement, and direction. Although it is difficult to take time from daily activities to be alone and pray, we can attend to the stirrings and yearnings in ourselves even within a few seconds. Rather than rushing to respond or speak, give others time to express themselves completely. To better insure our responses are appropriate, ask for God’s guidance and direction. Taking time to hear God’s voice can mean the difference between wise counsel and meaningless dialogue.

Attentive silence is probably the most important and yet, the most difficult listening skill to master. Many people feel uncomfortable with silence and are pulled to fill pauses in conversations with questions, advice, and compulsive chatter. Keep in mind, periods of silence allow us to observe the other person and think about what he or she is and is not communicating. It is also a time to listen for cues from God as to what words will be most comforting, nurturing, compelling, or instructive.

LESSON 2: DISPLAY EMPATHY

Mary came to where Jesus was waiting and fell at his feet, saying, “Master, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, a deep anger [emotion] welled up within him. He said, “Where did you put him?” “Master, come and see,” they said. Now Jesus wept. John 11:32–35, The Message

In this experience, Jesus demonstrates a compassionate and appropriate response by quietly listening. In situations when the patient is hurt, confused, frightened, or angry, it is important to gain understanding of his or her feelings before responding with how much we care. Similarly, when there are happy events it is also important to demonstrate God’s love in how we rejoice with others and affirm and bless them.

Caring listening requires us to listen more than we speak. Most often when we listen, we evaluate what others are saying, doing, or not saying. As we judge, our values, motivations, and experiences influence what we hear. If we sincerely want to empathize with another person, we must work to suspend judgment and personal involvement until we have heard an entire message.

Consider the ways that Karen*, a geriatric nurse, demonstrates empathy. After explaining the protocol for medication to her patient, Jim*, she noted that he was displaying signs of dementia. She then called the patient’s daughter to explain the criticality of correct dosing for her father. She listened to the daughter’s concerns, acknowledged the fears she expressed, and provided alternatives for her to consider when her father leaves the hospital.

Noticing that a new patient, Carlos*, was withdrawn and showing signs of depression, Karen made a note on his chart. Later, she stopped and sat with him. At first he was not very talkative; she waited through the silence. After a few minutes Carlos began to tell his story.
She learned he had no visitors and that his family still lived in Honduras. The next day, Karen enlisted a nurse who spoke fluent Spanish to visit Carlos each day until he left the hospital.

Karen paid attention to and acted on what she observed from her patients. She engaged them in real dialogue. By listening empathetically, she allowed others to express their thoughts and feelings, without judgment. Her genuine expressions of empathy built a more supportive and caring environment.

We show empathy by encouraging others to talk and following what they have said. When in pain or without someone to listen, many people feel alone. Listening with empathy is one of the most important gifts a person can give to someone else. Jesus’ second lesson for us is: Display empathy. Once someone expresses his/her feelings and feels heard, the healing process begins.

By encouraging others to talk, we demonstrate empathy and support. Observing a co-worker returning from a meeting, looking depressed, you might say, “Looks like you’ve had a tough morning; want to talk about it?” Your question provides an opportunity for the person to begin talking and allows feelings to surface. After a person responds, we can help him or her continue talking by nodding our heads or saying: “Go on...,” “What happened next?” or “I see...” These behaviors signal interest in what is being said.

**LESSON 3: DEMONSTRATE PATIENCE**

Many among his disciples heard this and said, “This is tough teaching, too tough to swallow.” Jesus sensed that his disciples were having a hard time with this and said, “Does this throw you completely? What would happen if you saw the Son of Man ascending to where he came from? The Spirit can make life. Sheer muscle and willpower don’t make anything happen. Every word I’ve spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making. But some of you are resisting, refusing to have any part in this.” (Jesus knew from the start that some weren’t going to risk themselves with him. He knew also his own people. He patiently listened. He didn’t become defensive, try to explain his point of view immediately, or give others something to fight against; rather, he waited to advocate his position until a less emotional time, when others were more open to receiving his message.

Once someone expresses their feelings and feels heard, the healing process begins.

> who would betray him.) John 6:60-64, The Message

John records how patiently Jesus answered questions from his disciples. Even as his followers argued, grumbled, and withdrew, Jesus remained calm and nondefensive. Jesus’ third lesson is: Demonstrate patience.

Patient listening occurs when we hear a person out, with minimal responses and maximum acceptance. Rather than articulating our opinions and feelings, we concentrate on understanding the other’s point of view. When we give undivided attention and listen more than we speak, we offer respect, genuine love, and concern.

Listening patiently and attentively is difficult when we are rushed or feel we already know what the person will say. Many of us finish a person’s thoughts because we’ve handled dozens of similar cases. But for the patient, family member, or colleague, this may be his or her first time. Due to our experience and knowledge, it is difficult to refrain from offering advice, quickly stating our position, or discounting a concern.

Sometimes, when patients are afraid and angry, they take it out on their care providers. Patient, caring listening diffuses fear, anxiety, and stress. Think of how Jesus responded when he was attacked by the Pharisees and Most of us have been guilty of getting impatient, interrupting, or discouraging others from talking. Senior citizens often encounter irritation and impatience from others. Lucy*, a resident of a nursing home, feels insignificant and unheard when providers come into her room and talk about her as if she weren’t there, or people cut her off, using such comments as: “That’s nice,” “You’ve told me that before,” or “You shouldn’t feel that way.” We show Jesus’ love and concern by being patient listeners. Just being near, giving eye contact, or asking questions related to what is being said make a person feel valued.

By encouraging others to keep talking, we learn about the other person. It is easy to begin evaluating a message before the person finishes talking. Rather than rushing to judgment and jumping to conclusions, it is better to mentally note or write down points you’d like to clarify, and to keep listening. Showing patience rather than annoyance allows a person to feel heard and often allows a patient to share more information than s/he would have otherwise.

Mr. Wallace* came into the Emergency Department having abdominal pain. He was angry, especially when there was a delay in getting his test results back. Instead of focusing on his anger and becoming defensive,
his nurse softly reflected back that he seemed anxious. He opened up and shared that his father had passed away recently from colon cancer. He felt sure he had the same diagnosis. Having this additional information helped hearts. Jesus’ fourth listening lesson is: Ask clarifying questions.

There is an art to asking questions. In contrast to grilling someone, clarifying questions probe for underlying feeling, as well as message content. Skillful open-ended questions use what or how to encourage broader responses from others. Asking such questions as; “What did you hear the doctor say?” or “How can we make you more comfortable?” and “How do you plan to share the news with your family?” elicit more than yes or no responses.

Some people are embarrassed about letting others know what they are thinking or feeling. Consider the difference in asking a patient who is making grimacing facial expressions these questions; “Are you in pain?” versus “It looks as if you’re uncomfortable, what has changed in the last hour?”

By using sensitive probing, listeners discover underlying issues and concerns. Questioning clarifies verbal and nonverbal messages and provides more accurate data about the emotions and thoughts of others. Rather than keeping thoughts and feelings hidden, questioning opens channels of communication.

Livy* is in a time of transition as she encounters going home with newborn twins. Newly widowed, she is a single mom. Unlike others who are new mothers, she is mourning the loss of her husband and has few relatives in the area. Consider how Livy might respond to the following: “The social worker shared some of the programs we have for new moms. Which ones do you think would be most helpful to you?” “It sounds as if you have a supportive church. I’m wondering what services they might provide to help you?” “You mentioned feeling overwhelmed. What are the biggest concerns as you prepare to go home?”

Be sure your questions are pertinent to the discussion and not merely for curiosity. Sometimes asking for examples helps give better understanding. Using questions, listeners better understand others, without directing the conversation. Though we often need to ask questions/request clarification, we should not ask so many questions that we control the conversation. Questioning is a way to clarify and gain insights into others.

LESSON 5: REINFORCE AND SUMMARIZE

I am Light that has come into the world so that all who believe in me won’t have to stay any longer in the dark. If anyone hears what I am saying and doesn’t take it seriously, I don’t reject him. I didn’t come to reject the world; I came to save the world. But you need to know that whoever puts me off, refusing to take in what I’m saying, is wilfully choosing rejection. The Word, the Word-made-flesh that I have spoken and that I am, that Word and no other is the last word. I’m not making any of this up on my own. The Father who sent me gave me orders, told me what to say and how to say it. And I know exactly what his command produces: real and eternal life. That’s all I have to say. What the Father told me, I tell you. John 12:46-50, The Message

Jesus provides an excellent model for how to reinforce and summarize a message. He reinforces his purpose by reiterating key points. Jesus knows that many messages don’t reach a person the first time, and that repetition is important for retention. He uses a variety of different examples to reach...
different listeners. Jesus’ fifth lesson is: Reinforce and summarize.

We need to listen carefully and test our understanding of what others are saying. By repeating what we have heard, we increase the likelihood that we interpret messages correctly. By paraphrasing both the message content and feelings in words, we can help assure understanding.

Allen* recently called several family members and friends. Because they had just spoken with him, they were surprised when Allen wound up in the emergency room with a drug overdose. His words had been: “Just calling to see what you were doing. I hadn’t talked with anyone in a while.” Unfortunately, no one picked up on the fact that Allen hadn’t talked with anyone or the nonverbal cues in his tone of voice. If they had listened more carefully, they might have noticed his slow speech and lack of inflection in his voice as signals of depression.

In addition to picking up on nonverbal cues, listeners need to test their understanding of what they hear. Listeners clarify messages and make certain they’re interpreting messages correctly by summarizing what they heard and asking questions such as, “So are you suggesting that I wait until I get the lab report before making my next appointment?” or “Do you want me to come to the meeting at 9:00 or 9:30?” Remember, listeners often assume they’ve interpreted messages correctly and are put at a disadvantage if they fail to get involved and interact with the speaker throughout the communication process. At times, that professionals demonstrate Christ-centered care through listening, they make a difference.

Skillful, open-ended questions use what or how to encourage broader responses from others.

You were trained as a professional, to provide quality care. As healing professionals, who also are Christians, these biblical lessons challenge us to focus on the power of effectively listening to foster greater compassion and care for the people with whom we work and live. Christians can make a difference by modeling effective listening skills. Good listening is a calling modeled by Christ.

Acknowledgment

Special thanks to Debra Godfrey, MHA, BSN, RN, and Vice President—Patient Care Services (CNE), at Carolinas Medical Center, Pineville, North Carolina, who provided wise counsel, content validity, examples, and stories to enhance this article.

