Listening, Entry 1 of 3

In service, we listen well by listening for common ground rather than for ways to prove that our idea is better.

—Guiding Principles, Tradition Four, “In Service”

NA offers plenty of opportunities for us to learn how to do a better job of living in the world. While very few of us show up to NA with the credentials of “great listener,” sitting through recovery meetings can teach us much about making an effort to truly understand what others are saying. The listening skills we hone in recovery meetings are quite useful in NA service, too. Self-centeredness might cause us to put the responsibility for good communication on others: If they would just be clearer, we wouldn’t have to listen so carefully. As we learn in meetings, with our sponsors, calling other addicts—communication is a two-way street, and we’re much better off when we work on our side, rather than insisting on improvements across the way.

“I noticed a fellow trusted servant frequently restating things other members had shared, but in different words,” a member wrote. “I got angry, thinking they wanted credit for everyone else’s ideas. After a while, I realized that they were basically interpreting for themselves as they tried to understand what other people were saying. The service meetings take longer, but I think hearing things in multiple ways actually ends up being helpful.”

There are many ways we can improve our ability to listen in service. For example, not talking while others are talking, can be practiced well in most recovery meetings. Other techniques, like asking others to clarify what they're saying, might be better reserved for service meetings. Sponsorship helps, too, of course. A member wrote, “My sponsor would say ‘what I hear you saying is...’ I started using that phrase in service, and soon my communication was improving dramatically!”

I typically have more in common with others than I may believe. I will listen for common ground with patience and gratitude.
Listening, Entry 2 of 3

*We learn to actively cultivate our listening skills, using our ears more than our mouths in conversation.*

— *It Works, Tradition Two*

Being open-minded is a key spiritual principle of Tradition Two in which we invite a Higher Power to develop and guide our group’s conscience in decision-making. One helpful step toward getting our minds open enough to participate in this process is to open our ears to each other. And, as the cliché goes, we’re not just hearing words (*blah, blah, blah, waiting for my turn to speak*) but listening to them. For that to happen in earnest, we need to take a break from talking, or thinking about what we’re going to say when it’s finally our turn.

A mistake we often make in relationships—and this easily applies to service in NA—is believing that being heard and getting our point across is the most important contribution we can make. There are times when we confuse listening with telling someone how much we understand and immediately sharing our own story of identification. And other times our evidence for listening is a hefty list of solutions to the challenges a member has just shared with us. Sometimes an addict just wants to be heard. Our sage advice can wait until it’s asked for.

When we actively listen in conversation or in a group discussion, we’re able to make more meaning of the topic, have more empathy, be more inclusive and curious. We tap into the conscience part of Tradition Two when we listen to—and absorb—the voices of our fellow members. Our perspective broadens, context deepens. At our most open, we can see things as others see them, maybe even clarifying our own viewpoints in the process. We can be influenced. An addict shared, “I feel much more at peace when I am listening and not trying so hard to be heard—and isn’t serenity what all this is about anyway?”

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*Today will be a day when I’m going to open my mind and my heart by opening my ears and not my mouth. Be quiet, brain, I’m listening!*
Active listening is a form of meditation. Some of the most important messages are delivered through some unlikely people.

—Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Conscious Contact”

In the simplest terms, we can think of prayer as talking to our Higher Power and meditation as listening. No matter the method, the goal is the same: We are developing a conscious contact. The wording is significant. Contact refers to the connection we foster through prayer and meditation. Consciousness implies that we are intentional in our efforts—awake and aware, purposeful and deliberate. In one member’s experience, “meditation sharpens my focus and calms my mind. I can let go of what I think I know. With that, I’m more open to stumbling on what I need, often from unexpected sources. I practice this mindset as I go about my day and my connections—with others and my Higher Power—benefit.”

It’s often easier to stay open to the message when we set aside our ideas about the person doing the talking. “If I listen with my heart—it keeps my thoughts from interrupting,” a member shared. “My recovery has been improved by people who couldn’t seem to take their own advice, bless their hearts. I never know who’s going to save my life.” Empathy and attentiveness help us listen with an open mind, consider different points of view, and be receptive to the message no matter the source.

Others remind us to listen with more than our ears. It’s an old trope in the deaf community that hearing people are emotionally inhibited because they hide behind words. “We communicate with our whole being,” a member explained. “Signing taught me to be present, receptive, and open—mentally, physically, spiritually—to that exchange of energy.” We might all aspire to communicate in such a connected, visceral way: doing our best to listen for resonance and not letting words tell the whole story. When we’re consciously listening for it, we can let a message nudge us in a direction, shape a decision, or make the next right action clear.

I will consciously listen with all I’ve got—mind, body, heart, and spirit—and be open to messages from unlikely messengers.