

EMPATHIC LISTENING



MAIN FEATURES

Reinforced skills (TASC Cluster)	LEAD, FOCUS ON SOLUTION
Suitable for	Teachers, Students
Difficulty level	Middle
Setting	Group
Minimum number of participants	2
Average time length	1.5 hours
Special equipment	No
Online version	Yes, but limited

1. DESCRIPTION

This exercise for pairs and groups helps to understand the importance of empathic listening and learn how to become an empathic listener.

Empathic listening is an important valuable personal growth and relational skill.

Hearing (like taste, touch, vision) is one of our natural senses. We always hear something, it does not necessarily require special attention. Listening, however, requires focus and attention. Listening is intentional (indeed, like telling) and to a single 'message' (e.g. a story, music). People are born with hearing but listening is developed by learning in (social) contexts.

Practicing empathic listening means that you:

- Allow the other person to lead the conversation and determine the topic discussed;
- Remain utterly attentive to what the other person is saying;
- Avoid interrupting, even when you have something important to add;
- Ask open-ended questions that invite more from the speaker;
- Avoid coming to premature conclusions or offering solutions;
- Reflect to the speaker what you heard them say.

You can practice your own empathic listening skills with different exercises, but in this exercise we focus on one in which you work with your clients/users on increasing their empathic listening skills.

2. AIM / BENEFITS

Empathic listening offers meaningful and/or therapeutic value for someone struggling with a problem, as it allows them to solve their difficulties in the company of a caring, mindful listener.

Empathic listening creates a safe space for conflict resolution and problem-solving, it builds respect, trust, and mutual understanding, relieves tensions and discord and encourages deeper sharing of feelings and information.

3. TASC COMPETENCIES CLUSTER(s)

The focus of the exercise is on Empathic Listening as a skill for both teachers as well as students. The skill relates to the capacity to listen in an empathic manner to your students. As such it is related to SUPPORT.

It is also relevant to underpin the scaffolding and proximal development, and build relationships, which are part of LEADING. In a similar manner it is also relevant for Focussing on SOLUTIONS, as it requires good empathic listening skills on the side of the teachers and also for their students when working in groups.

For LEADING it is relevant for group reflective practices, as without the capacity of a group to listen actively and empathically to others members, the reflection might not be so effective, in particular in relation to collaborative leadership and power dynamics in the relationship.

4. HOW TO DO THE PRACTICE

Step 1 / Preparation

Before starting the exercise, briefly explain what empathic listening means.

The actual exercise, emphasises 3 key ingredients:

- Pauses;
- Verbal paraphrasing;
- Non-verbal paraphrasing.

Use open-ended questions about his/her gestures. For instance; “While you were talking you shook your head; What does it mean?”; “You moved your hand while you were talking about this topic: What do you think this gesture communicates to you?”...

- Allow for silences: resist the urge to fill the silence.
- And above all: Keep calm.

Then explain how the exercise will actually be done, i.e., explain that it consists of practising three aspects of empathic listening, and that the exercise is repeated 2 or 3 times (if deemed relevant) so that all participants experience the 3 roles present in the exercise:

1. Speaker
2. Listener
3. Observer: the role is to observe the dialogue between the speaker and interviewer, and provide observer constructive feedback.

As a quick note, the exercise can be done without the observer role, due to time constraints, however the role adds on valuable information and being an observer allows one to look outward-in into the listening process. If the teacher works with a pair, he/she should take on the observer role.

Step 2 / Intro on paraphrasing

In this part of the exercise the participants are introduced to the topic of paraphrasing.

The teacher explains to the participants the term paraphrasing and what it means, i.e. rewording of another person's thoughts and/or feelings. It gives the message to the Speaker that the Listener is listening, is interested, is caring about what the Speaker is saying and is trying to understand what is important to the Speaker.

The participants also receive information on what they are expected to paraphrase. The teacher explains that they should paraphrase the content, the emotion (in particular stemming from the Speakers, voice and body language) or both. The Listener needs to be aware that a good paraphrase gets to the core of what the Speaker was saying, and should be shorter than the original words. It should always begin with "you" (not "I"). In essence it aims to capture the Speakers' intention, and not repeat the Speakers words exactly, but at the same time it should not introduce new concepts or thoughts.

The teacher then provides examples. However he/she can decide to have a short paraphrasing practice in the case he/she considers that this would enhance the Empathic Listening exercise, and that due to the characteristics of their participants this would enhance the effectiveness of the full Empathic Listening exercise.

If the teacher decides to do a short practice, these are the steps:

1. Create pairs
2. Ask the participants to speak on a topic that is important in their lives for about 30-60 seconds maximum.
3. When the Speaker finishes the Listener paraphrases the content, remembering the rules for paraphrasing.

Step 3 / Intro on non-verbal aspects

After the teacher has explained (and practiced if needed) the paraphrasing, another aspect of the exercise is introduced, which is related to non-verbal paraphrasing and non-verbal communication.

The teacher reviews with the participants the strategies for reflecting feelings described in Step 2. Apart from these, the teacher can also decide to provide examples or images and ask the participants to analyze whether there is adequate non-verbal paraphrasing.

The teacher can also decide to do a short practice. In this case a good option would be to use the same pairs as in the exercise of Step 2, but turn the roles around (Speaker is now Listener and vice-versa) and then ask the Listener to practice non-verbal paraphrasing.

If the teacher decides to do a short practice, these are the steps:

1. Create pairs;
2. Ask the participants to speak on a topic that is important in their lives for about 30-60 seconds maximum;
3. When the Speaker finishes the Listener using non-verbal paraphrasing the content.

Step 4 / full-fledged practice

After these steps, a full-fledged Empathic Listening exercise is launched.

Now the teacher assigns the 3 roles: Speaker; Listener & Observer. The role of the Observer is emphasised, i.e. to observe the dialogue between the speaker and interviewer, and provides observer constructive feedback.

The teacher indicates a prompt to be used in the exercise, and which is to mark the start of the actual exercise. The prompt should be expressing the concern or reflection of the speaker related to the issue, problem or challenge to be addressed in the exercise. An example can be “Lately I have been thinking about how I handle difficult/emotional situations” or “I am concerned about the problems young people, like me, face to find a job” (the wording depends on the topic to be treated).

The Listener then listens to what the Speaker is expressing, and after the Speaker has shared his/her initial thoughts, the Listener remains quiet and uses a pause. If this pause does not prompt the Speaker to add on more detail or explanations to the initial thoughts, the Listener uses verbal paraphrasing on what the Speaker has said, and then pauses again.

If the Speaker still does not continue to express their thoughts the Listener should use an open question (embedding verbal paraphrasing in the question), and then pauses again. The listener should be instructed that pauses should not last forever, but no time limit is set for them.

During the full exercise the Listener should use non-verbal paraphrasing during the times the Speaker is talking.

The exercise goes on for about 90 to 120 seconds.

The Observer records the following items:

- The pauses, i.e. describes the moment the pause took place (i.e. after mere silence on the side of the Listener, paraphrasing or open question) and how long it lasted;
- The reaction of the Speaker to the verbal paraphrasing, both in their verbal as non-verbal expressions;
- The non-verbal paraphrasing of the Listener.

The roles are then turned around so that each of the 3 participants has the opportunity to practice all 3 roles.

Step 5 / Conclusion

After the 3 rounds the participants are asked to relate their experience in the activity. The following questions can be used to prompt their replies:

- Pauses: What about the average time Listeners waited? What was the reaction of the Speaker when the Listener used a pause? What do you think is the purpose of the pause?
- Paraphrasing (verbal and non-verbal): What strategies did you use to help paraphrase the content?; How did your Listener show his/her interest and attention as you were speaking?; How did the Listener show his/her non-verbal paraphrasing?; What do you want to take-away about paraphrasing?
- How was it for the Listener/Speaker/Observer to do this exercise?
- What happened when changing roles, and how did your experience in the former role (in the second and third round of the exercise) influenced your behaviour and interaction?

5. DEBRIEF

After the exercise the teacher could ask

- How was it for the Listener/Speaker/Observer to do this exercise? If the teacher took the observer role, he/she should express how it was for them as well, after the participants have answered these questions.
- What happened when changing roles, and how did your experience in the former role (in the second and third round of the exercise) influenced your behaviour and interaction? Here in case the teacher acted as observer, only the participants answer this question and the observation on the changing roles by the teacher in their roles as observer is addressed in the teacher's final remarks.
- What did you learn from this activity?
- How could empathic learning help you in your life/profession?

The teacher then finalizes by summarizing the main conclusions and "take-aways" based upon his/her own observations.

6. SPECIFIC MATERIALS

No specific materials are needed.

7. TIPS AND TRICKS

- Bear in mind the characteristics of your participants, if needed do the “intermediate” exercises/practices on paraphrasing proposed if you feel that an explanation from your side and the examples given are insufficient to get the message across.
- Use videos and images to show actually what you are conveying, e.g. with short video-clips on the specific issue you want to highlight. If there is time, a good practice could be to after the exercise and analysis show a clip and ask the participants to highlight the errors made by the Listener, what works well here is to adapt the clip to the target groups, e.g. a movie which you know relates to them, or an animated video. This can reinforce the take-aways and end the session with a more game-type activity.
- Make sure not only to focus on the 3 ingredients which are the main focus of the exercise but in your conclusions and final remarks highlight the conclusions with regards to all the aspects of empathic listening as mentioned in the preparation of the exercise.

8. ON-LINE VERSION

The exercise can be adapted to be practiced on-line, however, the emphasis will then be more on the pauses and verbal paraphrasing and less on the non-verbal paraphrasing (as only part of the body is seen). Using a video-conferencing tool the exercise can be used by a teacher acting as observer and having participants in pairs. Break-out session into threesomes is possible technologically, but complicates the observations possibilities of the teacher, reason for which we recommended to work with 2 participants at a time.

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY - SITOGRAPHY

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