Alzheimer Society
BRITISH COLUMBIA

ACTIVE LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION IN THE SUPPORT GROUP

People come to Alzheimer Society of B.C. support groups because they want to talk about the challenges they are facing as people with dementia or as family members of people with dementia. They want to talk about their experience with the disease, the changes and the losses they are living with and they want to hear how others have handled similar situations. They come to *communicate*.

Effective communication is vital for any support group to function well. Being able to communicate effectively is important not only for support group facilitators but for the membership as a whole.

Three aspects of effective communication:

I. Active Listening skills
II. Speaking skills
III. Barriers to communication

I. Active Listening Skills

When most of us think about communication skills we tend to think about self-expression: explaining ourselves, getting a point across, making our needs known, or persuading others to consider our point of view. By focusing on speaking, however, we miss the more important half of the communication equation: listening.

Being listened to is one of the key experiences of feeling helped

Listening to another person involves far more than merely hearing that person. Listening is an active process requiring that we pay attention to the speaker, trying to understand both what the speaker is saying and the feelings underlying what is said, and checking with the speaker to make sure that our understanding is accurate.

To be an effective listener a person needs to:

- Genuinely want to hear what the other has to say
- Accept the other's feelings and point of view without necessarily sharing them
- Know when to be silent and when to speak

Three key ingredients to successful listening are:

1. Attending to the speaker
2. Encouraging the speaker
3. Reflecting back the speaker's thoughts and feelings.

Attending to the speaker

Attending means to give your physical and psychological attention to the speaker. You not only pay attention, but you also can be *seen* to be paying attention. Showing that we are paying attention includes:

1. Facing the speaker
2. Keeping your eyes on the speaker most of the time
3. Maintaining a relaxed posture
4. Not rushing to fill silences; allow the speaker time to frame their thoughts
5. Avoiding the half-listening that results when you are trying to think about what to say next; try to devote your full attention to the person who is speaking

Encouraging the speaker

A good listener knows when to be silent and when to help the conversation along. There are a variety of ways to encourage a speaker:

1. Use physical cues such as occasional head nodding, smiling, and gesturing with hands, along with brief verbal reinforcement, e.g. "mm-hmm."
2. Be sparing with questions; excessive questioning can be very annoying, as well as intrusive.

3. Use open-ended questions rather than questions that require a “yes” or “no” answer, e.g. “Can you tell us more about the problem?”
4. Do not be too quick to express agreement or disagreement; just let the speaker know you understand what they are saying.
5. Avoid conversation killers:
    - Judgmental statements: “Well really, that’s no big deal.”
    - Giving unsolicited advice: “What you should do is . . .”
    - Offering trite reassurances: “Oh, you’ll be all right. Things always work out in the end.”
6. Do not shift the focus of the discussion away from the speaker by talking about yourself or debating a point.
7. Use the attending skills mentioned above.

Reflecting back the speaker's thoughts and feelings

Reflective listening involves listening carefully to what a person says, grasping the meaning of what is said and then restating this meaning so that the person feels heard and understood. It is important to listen not only for the meaning of what is said, but also for the *underlying feelings*.

One way to indicate that you have been listening and have heard both the message and the feelings behind the words is to offer the speaker a reflective, open response. In contrast, a closed response indicates to the speaker that you have neither heard nor understood what he or she was trying to say.

For example:

Janet	“I'm going crazy. He keeps asking me the same question over and over until I want to scream. I've tried everything but nothing works.”
Closed Response	“Screaming isn't going to help. In fact, you'll probably just make things worse.”
Reflective Response	**“You're really feeling at the end of your rope.”**
Gordon	“Nobody ever wants to listen to my opinions. I might as well not even bother to come to these meetings.”
Closed Response	“For goodness sake! That's absurd. Of course we listen to you.”
Reflective Response	**"It sounds like you're feeling neglected by the group, Gordon."**

Benefits to reflective listening:

1. Lets the speaker know that we have been listening. This encourages trust and further disclosure.
2. Allows the speaker the opportunity to correct our misconceptions if we have misunderstood their meaning.
3. Provides the speaker with the opportunity to consider more carefully what it is that they are trying to convey and to clarify their thoughts.

Possible Challenges to Reflective Listening

Common mistakes people make when they first practice reflective listening skills:

- Sounding like a parrot by repeating the speaker's words verbatim without necessarily showing understanding. Learning to paraphrase effectively takes practice.
- Ignoring the feelings behind the words and focusing only on content.
- Summarizing the speaker's message too quickly without having properly understood what the speaker is saying or feeling.
- Using reflective listening at inappropriate times (e.g. when the speaker is simply seeking information, or when the speaker appears to be avoiding the issue).

II. Speaking Skills

As a support group facilitator, perhaps the key to successful communication is learning how to be an effective listener. But there are a few important points about speaking that are worth keeping in mind when you are speaking to others:

- Clearly formulate the message you are trying to convey before you try to convey it.
- Articulate your message as clearly and precisely as you can.
- Check with the listener(s) to make sure that your message has been understood.
- Clear up any differences between what you said and what was actually understood.

III. Barriers to Effective Communication

All too often people want to communicate with one another but somehow fail in the attempt. There can be many reasons for this failure, but most tend to fall into three specific categories: judging, solving the problem and avoidance.

1. Judging

Judging is probably one of the biggest barriers to communication. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most common. Judging can include both blaming or criticizing responses as well as praising or approving comments. It is easy to see how criticism and blaming can be interpreted as judging, but it is important to realize that praise and approval can also be forms of judgment.

Criticizing and blaming

“Just relax, you’re taking this too personally - he has Alzheimer’s, what do you expect!”
“You’re too fussy, don’t be a perfectionist – let it go!”

Criticism and blaming are two of the surest ways to cut off communication. A person who is being criticized is likely to feel inadequate, stupid, inferior and incompetent not to mention hurt and angry. They are unlikely to risk further self-disclosure.

Moralizing

"Well, I would never put *my* mother in a nursing home." "I feel it's our duty as husbands and wives to . . ."

Moralizing is a sometimes unintentional projection of your values on to another person. It might make the listener feel guilty, anxious or annoyed and it will probably not lead to further trust and disclosure.

Praise and approval

Praise can be a constructive way of letting people know how much we appreciate and cherish them. "That suggestion you gave me really helped." "It makes me feel good that you understand what this is like for me."

Unfortunately, sometimes giving praise and approval can be unhelpful and might even have the effect of being dismissive, judgmental, providing false reassurances or shutting down conversation. "You're always so patient and calm with him. I'm sure you'll never have any problems dealing with his Alzheimer's disease." This statement could make the speaker feel uncomfortable, or defensive. It could also put unrealistic expectations on a person or prevent them from expressing 'negative' emotions, "Oh, I'm not really all that patient, some days I feel that I can't go on."

Also be aware that praise could present you as the 'expert' and diminish the speaker's experience. It is important to note that depending on your relationship with the other person, they may feel that your approval is not necessary.

Name-calling and labelling

"You're a real complainer aren't you?" "Nothing is ever right." "Oh, typical male."

Calling people names makes it difficult to get to know the real person beneath the label. It strips a person of all complexity and reduces them to a mere stereotype. Name-calling is more likely to lead to arguments and divisions rather than to an examination of the behaviour that has prompted the labelling.

2. Solving the Problem

Giving advice

"Well, I really think you should . . . " or "If you ask me, you need to . . ."

The temptation to give advice comes quite naturally to most of us. Unfortunately, giving advice tends to imply a lack of respect for the ability of people to arrive at their own solutions and can make the other person feel inadequate. In our eagerness to provide answers, it can be all too easy to overlook the complexities of a problem.

By giving advice we often bring the conversation to an end and prevent the person from sharing more of their concerns and ideas. By listening carefully and asking sensitive questions when appropriate, we are more likely to help the person achieve their own understanding and arrive at their own answers.

Giving advice should not be confused with sharing information. Giving advice provides a solution, not necessarily one that the speaker would have come to on his or her own. Providing information and options can give the speaker the knowledge necessary to come to their own informed solution.

Ordering and threatening

"Just do it!" "Either you call the doctor, or . . . " "You'd better not even think about it."

Ordering and threatening are more extreme forms of providing solutions and are communication tactics that have no place in a support group. When we try to control another's behaviour with orders and threats, we are more likely to encounter resistance and resentment than cooperation.

3. Avoidance

Diversion

"Your situation is exactly the same as my . . ." or "Did I ever tell you about . . ." "Well, enough sadness, let's look on the bright side."

Diversion is, unfortunately, a common conversational tactic. It is often used to avoid dealing with uncomfortable issues or emotions. Sometimes people divert a conversation simply because they do not have well-developed communication skills. Sometimes people use diversion as a way of switching attention back to their own concerns. However it is used, diversion blocks the speaker's attempt to share and be heard.

Logical argument

"Look at the facts. If you don't get George into a day centre, you're never going to get any time to yourself."

There is nothing wrong with using logic to get a point across or to solve a problem. Logical arguments become a problem when we use them to avoid dealing with the emotional component underlying a particular issue or concern, or by ignoring that each person's situation is complex and unique.