

Hello, and welcome to the Foundflashlight Podcast, where we help parents help their teens find a way through the darkness.

As a reminder, I am not a professional and this is not medical or psychological advice. I am just a parent on the internet who wants to share my opinions and experiences in hopes that they can help someone else.

Today I want to talk about Active Listening.

The skill that is most used on the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is active listening. For many people, it takes practice, but anyone can learn.

Active listening means making the other person a priority. You are actively engaged in the conversation, but you are listening, more than speaking.

Whether or not a person is in crisis, everyone wants to feel heard. You want to stay present in the conversation and not get distracted. A common distraction is planning your response instead of listening to what they are saying. This is not about you.

The way that people feel heard is when you can identify an emotion to what they are saying. For example, if someone says that their girlfriend cheated on them, instead of saying, "wow, that is terrible" you could say something like "wow, you must feel so betrayed." Terrible is about the event, betrayed is how the event makes them feel. We call them feeling words but they don't have to be touchy-feely.

By supplying feeling words, you are proving that not only are you listening, but that you get what they are saying. And sometimes we get it wrong. We supply a feeling word that is not the emotion and the person says, no that's not it at all. You can just say "I'm sorry, tell me more about it." But more often, when we identify the emotion the person is feeling, they say "yes, that's it exactly." And if they are saying that, they are feeling heard and if they are feeling heard, then they are not alone; you can feel their weight lighten a bit. The thing they are struggling with makes sense to someone else. That doesn't make it hurt less, but now they know that someone else can relate, that what they are feeling is not crazy or wrong. Allowing someone to feel that they are not alone is a big step toward keeping them safe. This is how we listen people to safety.

There are lists and wheels of feeling words that you can grab online that can be helpful, but you should stick to the ones that you would use in your regular vocabulary. Especially if it is with your teen. They will know right away if you are speaking in a way that is not usual and it will likely make them less willing to open up.

Also, never underestimate the power of simply acknowledging that something happened that was hard for them. When they tell you about something that occurred at school you can say "wow, that stinks." Depending on your family culture, you can use stronger language. In my house, we didn't curse in front of the kids and consequently, the kids didn't curse in front of us. But occasionally, when my kid was struggling and told me something I would say "wow, that

must have sucked.” Using the stronger word seemed to strengthen the connection. It showed that I was paying attention and that I was willing to tweak a norm because this situation was important. Of course, this only worked because I didn’t use that language in front of my kid regularly - it was noticeable when I did. I’m not suggesting that you curse to your kids as a solution. I am saying that words matter when you are connecting with someone. You have to use the language that works in your home.

But more important than the speaking is the not speaking. If you are really there to support your teen, then this is about them and not you. Listen to what they are saying. You are trying to create a space where they feel comfortable talking to you and that means giving them a chance to talk and not having big reactions about what they say. Ask open ended questions, don’t ask for details. You may be dying to know which classmate it was that hurt their feelings but if they don’t offer, don’t ask. Again, this isn’t about you. It is important that they feel that they can talk to you without it being an inquisition. Keep your curiosity in check and listen to what they do want to tell you.

Some pitfalls to watch out for are planning your response and offering suggestions. It is in our nature to want to solve our kids' problems. But if you are thinking about what you are going to say when it is your turn, you are not listening to them when it is their turn. Have I mentioned that this isn’t about you? Stay in the conversation with them. Don’t move ahead. They will know if your attention has drifted. You can make small verbal acknowledgements like mhmm or wow, but stay with them. If there is a pause, acknowledge what you have heard by giving it a feeling word. “That must have felt embarrassing, I’m sorry that happened.” “You must have felt so isolated.”

Finally, don’t offer a suggestion or solution or your opinion, unless your teen wants that. And you can ask “Are you looking for my opinion or did you just want to tell me about it?” This is huge. It confirms to your teen that you were listening, and that, most importantly, you want what is best for them. That you can understand that this is their thing to navigate. If you ask a few times, there is a good chance your teen will take up the habit, coming to you and proactively saying, “I don’t need a solution, I just want to vent about what happened today.”

Timing is important also. Obviously, if you come across your teen while they are crying, that is the time to ask about it and listen. But if you sense that your teen is struggling in general, then choose your time to inquire. And right when they get home is not that time. Most kids, from the littles to the bigs, have spent their day keeping it together - whatever that means for them. They have made it through their classes and activities and generally done what is expected of them. When they get home, they need a chance to recover and reset. Give them a little space. They will likely head straight for whatever space allows them privacy. Wait some, 45 minutes, an hour. If you go to their room and you are able, bring a snack as an excuse to knock on their door. Then maybe you can say something like “I feel like things have been hard for you recently, do you want to talk about it?” They may say no and if so, let them! Remind them you are available if they need anything and then leave. This will be so hard for you because you

want to help and you want information. But to them it conveys that you are willing to talk on their terms and not yours.

And lets face it, talking to your parent is not easy. It is loaded with all of the other things that are relevant to your family. If kids have broken a family norm or a family rule or they think (even if it is not true) that they will be judged for what they are thinking, it is not going to be easy for them to talk to you about it. You can always ask them if they feel like they have a safe adult they can talk to: an aunt or uncle, coach or counselor, another friend's parent. If they say they do, be happy for that. It may hurt our feelings a little bit, but their safety is most important.

A kid who has an adult they believe will listen to them is a kid who has a tether to life. And that is what we are going for. A trusted adult is one of the best ways to keep a kid safe.

Thanks for listening and please share this and subscribe.

Until next time, this is the Found Flashlight podcast.