



A Care and Counseling Initiative



Healthy Dialogue About Controversial Topics

How to love and listen well while honoring your personal convictions



Charis is an Urban Alliance initiative. www.urbanalliance.com

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About Charis

Through Charis, Urban Alliance works with churches and organizations to help them communicate about mental health in ways that offer hope and create safe environments where people feel comfortable seeking help.

Many people who are struggling with their relational, emotional and mental health do not receive the support they need. They often do not know where to turn for help, or are embarrassed to acknowledge they are struggling. Additionally, a lack of resources in the community, poverty and stigma are barriers that keep people from receiving help.

Research shows that the church is one of the most common places people go to seek help when they are struggling emotionally. This is why it is so important for pastors and care providers to be equipped to offer care and connect people to appropriate help. Many churches offer support groups, care ministries or pastoral care. And, professional counselors who offer care from a Christian perspective provide services in the community.

Through Charis, Urban Alliance works with churches and organizations to help them communicate about mental health and relational health in ways that offer hope and create safe environments where people feel comfortable seeking help. Urban Alliance also equips care providers to respond sensitively, effectively connect people who are seeking care to appropriate support, and provide care, so they may cope well and heal.

The Charis website is a tool, managed by Urban Alliance, that can be used by individuals and organizations to help connect people in need of support to high-quality professional counselors, support groups and specialized support services offered from a Christian perspective.

These collaborative efforts have helped hundreds of people overcome barriers and more effectively cope, have ongoing support, strengthen their relationships, experience hope, joy and peace, and persevere despite life's challenges.

To learn more about Charis, visit www.urbanalliance.com/charis.
To visit the Charis website, visit www.charisnetworkct.org.



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It is healthy for all people to have opinions and personal convictions on various issues. Sometimes people's views will align and other times they will be quite different. When people with different opinions cannot communicate in healthy ways, it leads to division and the breakdown of relationships. This is particularly concerning when it occurs between believers within the body of Christ.

This booklet offers practical suggestions and tools to help people discern their personal stance on complex issues, acknowledge the reality of blind spots, navigate polarization around important issues, recognize healthy verses unhealthy communication patterns, and learn how to use "listening circles" to facilitate listening and understanding.

What is Personal Discernment?

Each person is regularly faced with a variety of situations and issues in their personal life and at a societal level. Many of these issues require that they form an opinion or conviction. An **opinion** is a view formed about a particular topic or issue while a **conviction** is a more firmly held belief that is often connected to a person's values. While there is not a formula for forming an opinion or conviction, there are some important steps a person can take to engage in a healthy process as they discern their personal beliefs about various topics.

Steps in Discernment

- 1. Humble yourself and ask the Holy Spirit for help:** The ultimate goal is to align your heart with God's on an issue. There is a need for great humility, because people are not God and lack His perfect wisdom and understanding. It is important to start this process from a place of humility, recognizing that all people have blind spots (places they can't see clearly).
- 2. Explore what Scripture says:** Scripture is a believer's compass and guides all discernment and decision-making. Start by studying Scripture to understand all that it says about a topic. Do not simply cling to one verse; look at all stories and verses related to the issue in their socio-historical context. Study the meaning of words in their original text, namely Greek (New Testament) and Hebrew (Old Testament). This more vigorous study of Scripture is what is required to really understand God's heart on an issue.
- 3. Practically educate yourself about a topic:** It is important to be educated on a topic before forming an opinion. Education involves learning about recent events, historical events, laws, research, etc. This will take some time and requires that you find reputable sources for your information.
- 4. Explore various perspectives:** Do not simply educate yourself using sources that support one side. Explore the issue from various vantage points, even if you do not agree with them. This can involve reading books and articles written from various perspectives, research that draws various conclusions, and talking to people who have different opinions.
- 5. Maintain a soft and teachable heart:** Throughout the process it is necessary to maintain a soft, teachable heart, so you are able to hear the Holy Spirit as He speaks and informs the process. The ultimate goal is to bring a person's heart into alignment with God's, and this is not possible without His help. Also remember that beliefs and convictions can change over time as God continues to speak into a situation and bring greater clarity.

We All Have Blind Spots

John Newton, Amazing Grace and the Slave Trade

Most people have heard of John Newton, the writer of the famous hymn, “Amazing Grace”. His story demonstrates God’s power to save and redeem, but also demonstrates places where people have significant blind spots that God brings attention to when they humble themselves and their hearts.

At a young age, Newton was kidnapped and forced to serve in the British Royal Navy on board *The Harwick*. Not caring about much of anything except being able to escape life aboard the British ship, Newton reached the coast of Sierra Leone and became the servant of a slave trader. His job was to capture African men and women, transport them abroad, and force them into slavery.

In 1748, a violent storm battered his vessel off the coast of County Donegal, Ireland, so severely that he called out to God for mercy. Another time he became violently ill and asked God to save him. Newton came to the conclusion that he was a sinner in need of forgiveness and later said these events were the turning point of his life and led to his spiritual conversion. He started going to church, got married, and promised that he would secure a respectable lifestyle.

However, Newton did not recognize the contradiction between his new faith and his vocation. He served as first mate on one slave ship and then as captain on three more. Mornings were spent studying the Bible and praying because of his new freedom in Christ, while evenings were spent cracking the whip on the backs of those he imprisoned. He admitted that he was a ruthless businessman and was cruel to the Africans he traded.

Eventually Newton retired from the slave trade and decided he wanted to become ordained as a pastor.

He came to deeply regret his involvement in the slave trade. The man who once captured and oppressed slaves became a voice describing the cruelty of slavery and an advocate for the abolition of slavery.

In 1787, Newton wrote a tract, “Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade”, which graphically described the horrors of the slave trade and his personal role in it. He influenced many people, including William Wilberforce, who would spend the rest of his life working towards the abolition of slavery. Later Wilberforce challenged Newton to speak publicly against slavery, the very occupation to which Newton had given most of his life. Newton accepted the challenge and became a major voice in the eventual abolition of slavery in England.^{1, 2, 3,}

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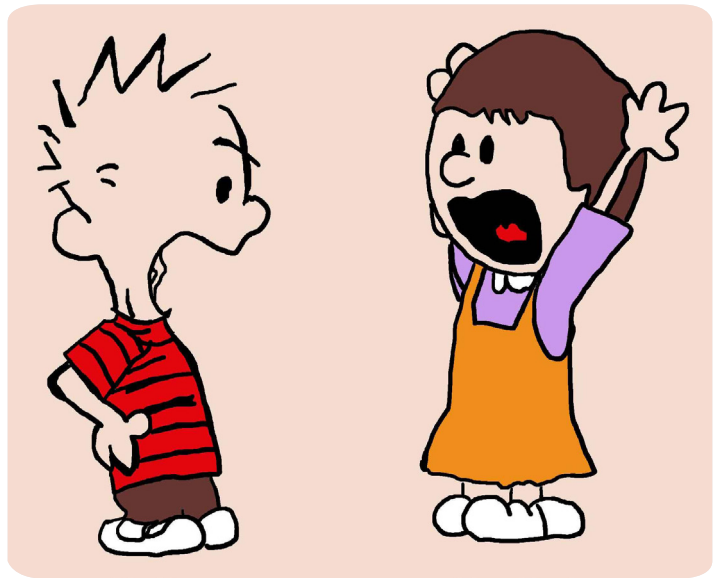
Today, slavery is understood to be an oppressive and abusive system, and its end is celebrated. However, during Newton’s lifetime, many Christians were in favor of slavery and angered by the abolitionists who wanted to end it. This story highlights all people’s need for humility and the reality that we need the Holy Spirit to help us become aware of our blind spots. By continually engaging in the five steps in discernment, people can develop and refine personal convictions so they are better aligned with God’s heart.

Polarization

Polarization refers to the divergence of attitudes and beliefs to ideological extremes. It occurs when people take vastly different stances on a topic and have a hard time finding any middle ground. Sometimes in the context of polarization, a person's perspective gets linked to a set of moral values. When this occurs, they may view those with a different position as less moral, lacking character, or lacking wisdom.

James 1:19-20 says, *"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."* There is nothing wrong with having a strong conviction. However, when a person's view gets in the way of their ability to listen well and extend love in relationships, it is important to pause and reflect on the situation. One might expect to see this type of polarization between groups of people within and outside of the body of Christ.

However, there is a growing polarization occurring within the church. Brothers and sisters who love the Lord and seek the counsel of Scripture to navigate ethical situations often draw different conclusions about the best course of action related to a particular situation. This is true of politics, social justice issues, the government's role in enforcing social distancing, vaccines, and health decisions, just to name a few.⁴ What is concerning is that this polarization pits believer against believer and breaks down the unity that God desires among His people. The Bible is clear that believers are to be humble, gentle, patient with one another, and ready to extend love, grace, and forgiveness so there is unity.



- *"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."* (Colossians 3:13-14)
- *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."* (Ephesians 4:2-3)

While believers may have different views and perspectives on various topics, it is important that they do not allow the enemy the opportunity to break relationship and unity by quenching the love that "binds" believers together and instead flame the fire of anger, condemnation, and contempt. When believers share their personal convictions in an honest, loving, and grace-filled manner, they have the opportunity to learn from and "sharpen" each other. This requires a person to be filled with the Holy Spirit, well "differentiated", and engaged in healthy communication patterns.

Personal Convictions and Self-Differentiation

According to Bowen, “self-differentiation” refers to a person’s ability to differentiate thoughts and feelings and maintains a sense of self when in relationship with others, including people whose views may differ from their own. People with healthy self-differentiation are able to acknowledge their opinions and preferences, even when they are different from another person’s. It also means they are able to have different opinions and values than their family members or friends, but are able to stay emotionally connected to them.^{5, 6}

People with low-levels of self-differentiation engage in the following types of behaviors:

- Form opinions solely in opposition to another person’s (i.e. a young adult holds personal convictions to oppose their parent’s conservative values)
- Waver in their feelings and thoughts in fear of hurting others or being rejected or shamed by them (i.e. a person pretends to agree with others at their church because they fear other’s will think less of them if they share their honest opinion)
- Demands that others have the same opinions and protests strongly when they do not (i.e. a leader at a church demands that his entire congregation have the same opinion on an issue and is condemning of those who do not agree)

A well-differentiated person is able to maintain a strong personal conviction and remain in relationship with people who disagree. They are able to freely share their perspective, not feel threatened by differing opinions, listen to the other person’s perspective, and avoid emotionally or verbally attacking the other person or engaging in unhealthy communication patterns.

What about when the Bible offers clear guidance on an issue? A well-differentiated person is able to share their perspective, listen to the other person’s point of view, and trust that the Holy Spirit will give clarity. They are able to entrust the other person to God, rest in His sovereignty (both in the interaction and surrounding the issue), and know He is at work in all things for good.

Even in situations where the Bible clearly defines something as right or wrong, unjust or oppressive, it may not be clear on the best course of action to take. It takes great wisdom to know how to understand and address most situations in life. For example, most Christian parents would agree that the Bible is clear that parents are to train and teach their children, but most struggle to know exactly what to do in any given situation. This is because the Bible does not speak to every possible parenting situation and the unique dynamics of each family. It takes great wisdom to discern both the Bible’s general perspective on an issue as well as the best practical course of action in a given situation. And, believers need to pray for one another and extend love and grace as they discern.

Healthy Communication When People Hold Different Opinions

When people are well-differentiated, they are able to listen to others even when they do not agree with them. Listening allows people to feel connected to one another, learn from each other, and grow in empathy. **Empathy is the ability to understand a situation from another person's perspective.**

It allows us to have compassion when another person is struggling, the sensitivity to respond with wisdom, and the ability to share in another person's experience. Empathy allows people to connect with one another in deep and meaningful ways.

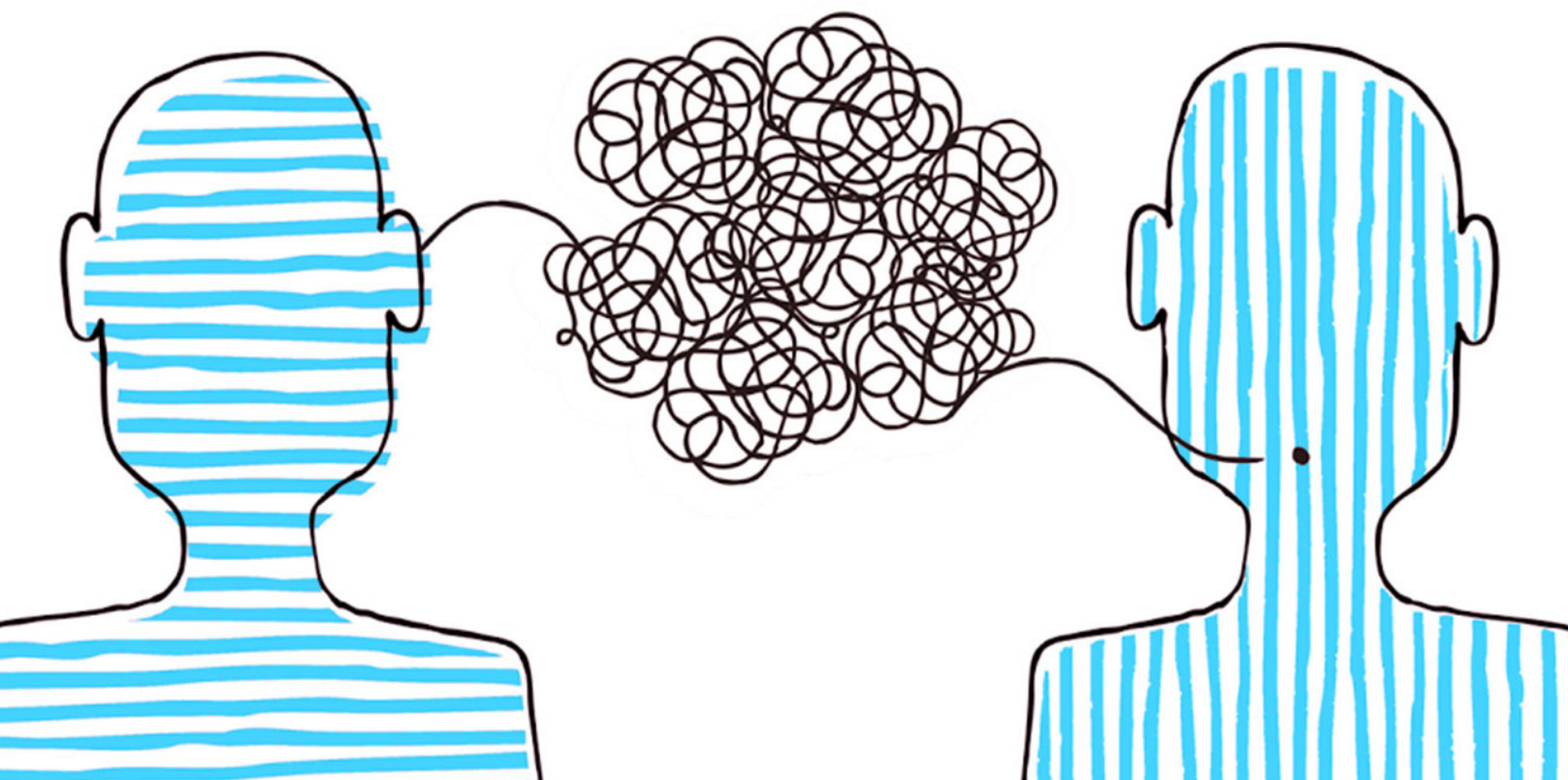
It allows us to live out scriptures, such as Romans 12:15-16, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn"* and 1 Corinthians 12:26, *"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."* Without empathy we are not impacted by one another's thoughts, feelings, and experiences and cannot love one another in the way Jesus intended.

All too often when one person is talking with another, they are planning the next thing they will say instead of listening to what is said. Think of the last time you engaged in a conversation about politics, justice issues, COVID-19, or topics related to faith. As the intensity of a person's conviction increases, they often find it harder to listen to what the other is saying and a stronger urge to prepare their response.

How can a person grow in their ability to listen well to another who holds a different opinion? Of course, there is something that only the Holy Spirit can do in a person's heart to increase their capacity for compassion, sensitivity, and love for others. There are also practical things we can do to grow in these areas:

1. Engage in healthy communication patterns and avoid unhealthy ones
2. Use active listening skills when interacting with others
3. Engage in a "listening circle" to better understand others' perspectives





John Gottman's Research on Communication

Research in the field of marriage and family relationships sheds light on healthy patterns that create connection and unity between people. These patterns describe communication “processes” or how two people communicate, as opposed to “content”, which describes what is being communicated. All people can learn to build healthy communication skills in their day-to-day interactions, regardless of the topics discussed. By learning healthy communication patterns people are able to enjoy stronger relationships characterized by greater intimacy, trust, and connection.

John Gottman has arguably conducted more research on healthy and unhealthy communication than anyone else in the clinical field. Through his research he has developed a framework describing healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns. Healthy communication is an important part of any healthy relationship. In marriage, unhealthy communication patterns are strongly predictive of divorce and the breakdown of relationships. While his research primarily focused on marriage relationships, the findings have applications to a variety of relationships, including those in the context of family, friendship, church, or even work.^{7,8}

The Four Horsemen

Gottman uses “The Four Horsemen” to describe four patterns of communication that are strongly linked to the breakdown of a relationship. The Four Horsemen is a metaphor depicting the end of times in the New Testament describing conquest, war, hunger, and death respectively. This framework offers helpful tools to the faith community as they navigate challenging conversations and work to foster unity despite differences in opinion and perspective. The Four Horsemen are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling and each have antidotes that diffuse them. ^{7,8}

Gottman uses “The Four Horsemen” to describe four patterns of communication that are strongly linked to the breakdown of a relationship.

Horsemen #1: Criticism

Criticism is a negative statement that attacks another person’s personality or character. It is an attack on another person at the core of their character. A complaint is a negative statement about a situation or request for things to be different.

Examples:

- Criticism: “You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don’t believe you are that forgetful, you’re just selfish. You never think of others! You never think of me!”
- Complaint: “I was scared when you were running late and didn’t call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other.”

Criticism makes a person feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt. It often results in an escalating pattern where criticism occurs with greater and greater frequency and intensity, often leading to contempt.

Antidotes to Criticism

Gentle Start-Up

Express frustrations without blame by using a soft or gentle start-up. Talk about feelings using “I” statements and express what you need in a positive way. Consider the questions, “What do I feel?” and “What do I need?”

Grace-filled Words

Words matter and have power. In fact, there are numerous scriptures describing the importance of kind, loving, and gracious words and the power of destructive ones.

- “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Colossians 4:6)
- “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1)
- “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” (Proverbs 18:21)
- “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” (James 1:26)
- “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” (Proverbs 16:24)

Therefore, we must consider the words we use and the impact they are having on the person.

Horsemen #2: Contempt

Contempt goes far beyond criticism. While criticism attacks another person's character, contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over them. Contempt attacks a person's sense of self or worth with an intent to insult or harm the other. It often involves disrespect, disdain, mocking with sarcasm, ridicule, name calling, and body language, such as eye-rolling or scoffing. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless.

Contempt is a heart condition characterized by judgement, condemnation, or bitterness towards another person coupled with a lack of humility. It can be overt in relationships and expressed directly to another through words and action or be covert and take the form of gossip, slander, or silent judgement of another. Contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce, and plays a powerful role in breaking down relationships.

Examples:

"If you vote for _____ I don't know that I can associate with you anymore. Clearly, you don't care about _____ and that makes me question your character and integrity."

"It's clear that the leadership of the church doesn't care much about the congregation since they won't resume in-person services. They are allowing the enemy to influence them and are being led by fear. I'm not sure I can stay at a church that won't take a strong stand for the Gospel and resume in-person services."

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Antidotes to Contempt

Humility

We are flesh and do not have God's perfect wisdom and perspective. Matthew 7:3-5 cautions us to remove the plank from our own eye before trying to remove a speck from another person's. This is a humbling reminder that we all have blind spots or places where we cannot see clearly. In fact, we often are unaware of our blind spots –hence the term. We can not see them. Therefore, it is critical that we approach interactions with love and humility. This means remembering that we always have more to learn and that there is value in understanding another person's perspective.

It is healthy for a person to have their own opinions and perspectives on various topics. And, believers ought to do their best to discern God's heart and opinion. However, sometimes believers weigh information differently and come to different conclusions. There are some issues that the Bible is very clear on, and others where it is not. It is okay to disagree with another person, but we must always remember that God is the judge and we are not.

Matthew 7:2 says, *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged."* It is not God's desire for us to judge another's motivation or intention, compare our perceived righteousness to theirs, or refuse to listen to their perspective because we have decided it is wrong.

Offer Appreciation and Respect

Regularly express appreciation, gratitude, affection, and respect for others. This creates a more positive perspective that acts as a buffer for negative feelings. The more positive a person feels towards another, the less likely they will feel or express contempt.

Recognize that the other person is God's son or daughter and precious to Him. Ask God to help you see a person more as He does and to appreciate the ways He has gifted them and uses them in the body of Christ. Remember that while the other person may have an opinion or perspective different than yours, this perspective does not define them or their value.

Horsemen #3: Defensiveness

When a person is defensive in an interaction, they blame the other person or minimize the significance of the situation rather than take responsibility for their part and acknowledge the problem. A defensive response says, "I am not the problem, you are."

Defensiveness is a form of self-protection where the person expresses either righteous indignation or communicates that they are an innocent victim. This strategy is used to ward off a perceived attack. When this happens, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further.

Example:

Person One: "I see the situation differently. I think it's important for _____. I feel like you are angry when I disagree with you."

Person Two: "What are you talking about? I'm not angry. You are overly sensitive and making a big deal out of nothing. If anything, I'm the one that should be upset with you."

Antidotes to Defensiveness

Explore the Other Person's Perspective

It is important to consider the thoughts and feelings of the other person before responding. This is a discipline and takes intentionality, especially when talking about a controversial topic. As a person grows in this discipline, they have an increased capacity to respond empathetically.

Take Responsibility and Ask for Forgiveness

Scripture is clear that restoration in relationships is the goal. This requires people to acknowledge when harm has been done and ask for and extend forgiveness. *"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."* (James 5:16). When a person expresses a hurt or frustration, the other person ought to consider any part they have played and ask for forgiveness.

Extend Grace

The concept of grace is counter-cultural. Grace is extending kindness that a person does not deserve. Consider any opportunity you have in an interaction to demonstrate grace with words or action.

Horsemen #4: Stonewalling

Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and simply stops responding to the other person.

Rather than confronting the issue, people who stonewall can make evasive maneuvers, such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive or distracting behaviors. Stonewalling is the result of feeling physiologically flooded.

Antidotes to Stonewalling

Take a Break

When a person is emotionally flooded from an interaction, they need to take a break and self-soothe. If they continue with the conversation, they are likely to engage in one of the horsemen previously discussed.

It is very important to come back to the conversation later, otherwise a person is simply stonewalling. Communicate to the other person that you need to take a break and let them know that when you have calmed down, you would like to continue the conversation.

God always wants to help us when we are distressed. He offers His comfort, peace, and presence and can help us to have wisdom and perspective before reengaging.

Grace is extending kindness that a person does not deserve. Consider any opportunity you have in an interaction to demonstrate grace with words or action.

Active Listening

Active listening is the ability to focus completely on a speaker, understand their message, comprehend the information, and respond thoughtfully. It involves listening to really understand the other person's perspective, rather than prepare one's response. Active listeners use verbal and non-verbal techniques to show and keep their attention on the speaker. This helps a person maintain their focus on the speaker, and helps the speaker see that the other person is focused on them. Instead of thinking about and mentally rehearsing what you might say when the speaker is done, an active listener carefully considers the speaker's words and commits the information to memory.^{9, 10}

Active Listening Skills:

- **Body Language:** Face the person and use your posture and facial expressions to communicate you care and are interested in what the person is saying. For example, nod occasionally, lean forward, smile, and avoid closed body language, such as crossing your arms.
- **Minimal Encouragers:** Use brief, positive prompts to keep the conversation going and show you are listening. For example, "umm-hmmm", "Oh?", "I understand", "Then?", or "And?"
- **Restating:** To show you are listening, repeat every so often what you think the person said, not by parroting, but by paraphrasing what you heard in your own words. For example, "Let's see if I'm clear about this..."
- **Reflecting:** Instead of just repeating, reflect the speaker's words in terms of feelings or meaning. For example, "This seems really important to you..."
- **Emotion Labeling:** Putting feelings into words will often help a person to see things more objectively. To help the person begin, use "door openers". For example, "I'm sensing that you're feeling frustrated...worried...anxious. Is that correct?"
- **Summarizing:** Bring together the facts and pieces of the problem to check understanding. For example, "So it sounds to me as if..." or, "Is that it?"
- **Validation:** Acknowledge the individual's problems, issues, and feelings. Listen openly with empathy and respond in an interested way. For example, "I appreciate your willingness to talk about such a difficult issue."
- **Clarifying:** Ask questions to better understand what the person is communicating and draw out additional information. For example, "When did that happen?"
- **Encouraging:** Ask questions to convey interest in what the person is saying and encourage them to keep talking. For example, "Can you tell me more about...?"
- **Probing:** Ask questions to draw the person out and get deeper, more meaningful information. For example, "What do you think would happen if you...?"
- **Effective Pause:** Deliberately pause at key points for emphasis. This will tell the person you are saying something that is very important to them.
- **Silence:** Allow for comfortable silences to slow down the exchange. Give a person time to think as well as talk.
- **Giving Feedback:** If you have the other person's permission and it seems appropriate, let them know what your initial thoughts are on the situation. Share pertinent information, observations, insights, and experiences.

These skills can be incorporated into any interaction. Active listening helps others feel comfortable sharing information with you. When you demonstrate your ability to sincerely listen to what others have to say, people will be more interested in communicating with you on a regular basis. Listening without judgement or interruptions builds trust and deepens relationships.



Listening Circles

“Listening circles” offer a structured way for people to communicate about various topics including those that are more controversial or challenging. The process creates a safe and empathic environment where each person is able to say what they are thinking and feeling to a group of 8-15 people. The key element of a listening circle is the willingness of its participants to shift from a formal, opinionated discussion to a receptive and thoughtful process of speaking and deep listening. The goal is to foster mutual understanding, learning, and support among people. People are able to speak from their hearts and listen deeply to one another.

The listening circle is a practical tool that can be used in a variety of settings, including church, work, among friends, and in the community, to facilitate honest, heartfelt dialogue in a safe and nonjudgmental environment. It can result in greater understanding, deeper connection, and a sense of well-being from being heard. It can also be used as a tool for people to learn from one another about their various perspectives and experiences related to a particular topic.^{11, 12}

The Process

The listening circle has three main foundations. The first foundation is that every participant speaks with intention by speaking about something that has relevance to the topic of conversation for the listening circle. The second foundation is to listen with attention. That is, every participant needs to be respectful to both the learning process and to all members of the group. The third foundation is to pay attention to the well-being of the circle by remaining aware of the impact of one's contribution to the circle, both as a speaker and a listener (e.g. not talk when another participant speaks, avoid criticism, pay attention to the person who is speaking, speak according to the general topic).

At the beginning of the listening circle, the facilitator(s) explain the rules of the circle:

1. **Psychologically safe atmosphere.** At the beginning, the facilitator should lead the group in a discussion about the listening circle process and the importance of emotional safety. The facilitator should provide guidelines about behaviors that will foster safety and empathy and those that will disrupt the process (e.g. criticism, contempt, or interrupting).
2. **Freedom in sharing.** Speakers should feel free to express whatever is in their heart, in any way they feel comfortable. They may share a story or a personal experience or simply their thoughts on a topic.
3. **One at a time.** Only one person talks at a time. The turns to talk are signaled by an object, which is handed over between the participants around the circle or placed in the center of the circle for interested participants to pick up. Generally, the person holding the object speaks and is the only one allowed to speak, even if they take a long time to think about what to say and there's a pause in the conversation.
4. **Review intentions.** The facilitator invites the participants to consider four "intentions" as they participate: to listen from the heart, to talk from the heart, to talk succinctly (usually 2-5 minutes each depending on time), and to talk with spontaneity.
5. **Focused comments.** All comments are addressed directly to the question or the issue, not to things that another participant in the circle has said. Importantly, both negative and positive comments about what anyone else has to say should be avoided.
6. **Speaking is voluntary.** Speaking in the circle is not mandatory. Listening without speaking is also participation. That is, a participant who does not wish to speak can simply pass the object without speaking (or never pick it up from the center).
7. **Length of time.** The listening circle continues until everybody has had one opportunity to talk. In some cases, when there is extra time, the facilitator may allow participants to speak a second time. When time is limited the facilitator may recommend how long each person should talk so everybody has the opportunity to share.

Before starting, group members may practice the rules until participants become accustomed to the dynamic in the circle. After explaining and practicing the rules, the facilitator invites the group to talk about a certain topic. The topic can be specific (e.g. thoughts and feelings about the election) or general (e.g. the most meaningful experience this year).

Framing the Topic

An important role of the facilitator is to frame the topic. Once the topic has been framed each participant's response must be in relation to the topic. Listening circles can be used to discuss just about anything. However, with more controversial topics it is important to be intentional to frame them clearly.

Possible ways to frame the topic:

1. **General Question:** The topic can be framed in the form of a question such as, "What is the most stressful thing for you about COVID-19?" or "How do you feel/what do you think about social media?"
2. **Recent Event:** The listening circle can be organized around a recent event. When this is the case, the facilitator will need to provide a summary of what has happened or may choose to read a news article. The facilitator can simply allow participants to share their thoughts and feelings on the event or the facilitator can ask a more pointed question about participants' experiences related to the event.
3. **Current Issue:** When the listening circle is organized around a current issue it is important for the facilitator to define the issue, share important information about the issue, and provide socio-historical context, if relevant. The facilitator can simply allow participants to share their thoughts and feelings on the issue or the facilitator may ask a more pointed question about participants' experiences related to the issue.
4. **Controversial Topic:** In some cases, the listening circle may be organized around a controversy. When this is the case, the facilitator will start by defining the controversial issue. It is important to give enough context so people can engage, but not share in a way that gives voice to one side of the issue over another. They may also try to give voice to different perspectives when they are clearly defined in society.

Challenges

It is important that each listening circle involves at least one leader who has been trained to facilitate groups and is capable of managing any **challenges** that arise. As with any group discussion, there is the potential for healthy interaction and the potential for challenging participant behaviors.

Examples of challenging behaviors:

- Participants may feel truly listened to and lose their sense of time. This may result in them talking for a long time and can frustrate other participants.
- Some participants might feel intimidated by the intimate atmosphere of the listening circle. This discomfort may be expressed as cynicism and sarcasm, which will have a negative impact on the rest of participants.
- Some participants may reveal very personal information that they will regret they shared afterwards.
- Participants who share later respond directly to the comments made by a previous participant.
- Participants use criticism or speak disrespectfully, creating an unsafe atmosphere. They may also break away from "I" statements.

Strong facilitators have experience facilitating groups and should be prepared to manage these and other challenging behaviors.

Conclusion

Healthy communication allows people to understand one another, feel emotionally connected, and build trust. While there are numerous benefits the reality is that it is very difficult, especially when two people disagree or have vastly different opinions. However, Jesus calls believers to learn to listen to one another, remain in relationship and treat others with grace, love and kindness regardless of the topic. The next time you are in a tense interaction remember to slow down, ask the Holy Spirit to help you and engage using the healthy communication skills referenced in this booklet.

A summary of the content in this booklet is provided on the handout included in the appendix.

Citations

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