

## Deep Listening

---

### The Choice of Deep Listening

Don Adams, PhD, CSL

During my long career as a Child and Family Psychologist, I learned that neither Deep Listening nor what I call “Deep Speech” come naturally to us. Adults speaking to children rarely use Deep Speech, ingraining in very young children that the main purpose of speech is to direct behavior in the material world. Beginning when our children are toddlers, most of our talk toward them expresses demands, controls, and descriptions. Such ego-based “Doing Speech” is focused on the instrumental doing world: “Don’t throw sand!” “Pick up your toys.” “Share.” “Slow down.” “Hurry up!”

Not surprisingly, this ingrained doing speech continues into adulthood. Doing Speech in adulthood typically responds associatively (through Doing Listening) to what others say by adding information (“I’ve got a blue one that works better.”); requesting information (“Where did you buy it?”); denying (“I don’t believe you!”); or making demands (“You should have gotten one for me!”). Such Doing Speech may get the world’s business done but none of these nurtures the soul or encourages Deep Speech. Even the expression of emotions via such ego-based doing-speech (e.g., “You’re making me so sad,”) may be designed—consciously or unconsciously—to manipulate.

In contrast, Deep Speech expresses one’s sense of self, emotions, and personal truths. Ideas being expressed by Deep Speech are connected to one’s heart wisdom. Deep Speech arises from our inner knowledge, which in turn is based on our own experiences, not on what we have been told to think or feel. Deep Speech yearns for understanding with others. When I speak my truth from my heart (e.g., “When you drive this fast, I feel scared.”), I want you to deeply listen, care, and allow my words to touch you. This is very different from the command, “Slow down!” Deep Speech seeks to be understood and does not make the listener responsible for or obedient to the speaker.

Deep Listening is the counterpart to Deep Speech. Deep Speech is usually learned from models, by being spoken to and listened to deeply. Those of us who had parents who could converse deeply were fortunate. But even if we did not grow up being spoken to and listened to deeply, Deep Listening is a choice that can be learned. The motivation to choose Deep Listening can come from multiple sources. Love is the most treasured source: we want to hear, see and understand those whom we love. We engage Deep Listening and Deep Speaking when we really want know others, be known to others, and be a genuine benefit to them. We may spontaneously engage Deep Listening when we are fascinated or in awe. Another prompt to

Deep Listening comes as the response to someone who is engaged in Deep Speaking. And the converse is true: if one adopts Deep Listening, others will often move into Deep Speaking. This is an important basis of effective psychotherapy.

Deep Listening is often infused with silence. The Maharishi said, “Silence is affirmation.” The choice of silence is a powerful Deep Listening tool to encourage deep speaking. Vows of silence are central to many spiritual practices. Silence is a centering and worshiping practice of the Quakers, for instance, who wait in silence for the spirit to move them before choosing to speak, and then speak with the voice of spirit.

Maintaining silence while others speak prevents Deep Listeners from interrupting or diverting the speaker’s flow. While maintaining listening silence, one has time to sense and grasp one’s own feelings and truths that may be arising in response to the other’s speech. Keeping silence during other’s speaking and maintaining a period of silence after the speaker finishes allows a fullness of understanding within the listener, which enhances the listener’s capacity to deeply know a fitting response, or to know that no response is required.

A Deep Listener’s silence also reduces the tendency of both persons’ verbal minds to divert into more familiar, associative, “doing” talk, making the exchange simply a common collaborative or argumentative conversation. Engaging Deep Listening provides the opportunity to get in touch with one’s own deeper, more authentic state of being. While Deep Listening is a gift to others, choosing to engage this powerful practice provides the wonderful gift of soulfulness to oneself as well.

A range of listening responses can lead others move into Deep Speech. As a psychotherapist, I provided Deep Listening to children of all ages as well as to my adult and older clients. Many encouraging responses are non-verbal, such as leaning forward with interest, smiling, giving content-free responses such as “Go on,” or “This is really important to you,” or simply naming the unspoken state of the speaker; “You are feeling shame,” for example. I learned to control my impulse to respond associatively with adults by holding my hand under my chin with my index finger up in front of my mouth in the shushing position. This served as a reminder to myself to stay quiet and not interrupt the speaker with any associative responses; to the client it conveyed that I was listening intently.

Deep Listening with children is a little different than with adults. It involves more non-verbal responses, postures, and facial expressions that mirror and support the child’s inner states. Matching body movements and vocal tones enables the development of deep rapport with children. “Following the child” is the key, with the main goal of freeing up the overly frightened, inhibited, or enraged child to allow emergence of the natural child. Many children experience this as an invitation to magical play and become flowing and joyous.

Deep Listening combined with intentionally matching physical alignments can also create a state of “entrainment,” which is the unconscious matching of tone, voice, and body between speaker and listener. In this state, listeners can be led into deeper states of self-

experience. Relaxation, meditation and hypnotic procedures can also help circumvent the associative doing-mind and open the more image- and emotions-based soulful-mind. Deep Listening is also a powerful tool for encouraging the full emergence of suppressed elements of the speaker's story which, though strong and detectible to the listener, are not yet in the speaker's awareness. The Deep Listener can choose to nudge these subconscious concerns toward awareness, leading to greater wholeness in the speaker, through a variety of strategies: naming, pointing openly or subtly, nonverbal signals, and more.

Every good psychotherapist has learned Deep Listening during training; but you don't have to be a psychotherapist to learn and benefit from this powerful set of skills. It is an intentional stance taken to enhance others' growth by encouraging and supporting their heartfelt speech and their deeper understanding of themselves. Deep Listening begets Deep Speaking; inevitably, the one who listens deeply also gains insight and greater self-knowledge. Sages exercise their sagacity by choosing Deep Listening with peers and with younger generations, promoting others' authenticity in speech and action. They know that by holding sacred space they enhance the depth of the connections, understandings and love in the world around them.