

Chapter 10

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is central to advocacy work.

It is how we make the core principles of advocacy come to life, and is perhaps the greatest skill we can offer in advocacy work.

Active listening prioritizes being with the survivor here and now.

Active listening encourages us to put a pause on any desire to jump in and “fix” or offer advice. Simply listening is a valuable service on its own. When we prioritize active listening, we recognize that it is a powerful tool that enables survivors to experience connection and be heard. Through active listening, we can also learn about additional needs survivors have, without asking invasive questions.

We value emotional and connection-focused needs through active listening.

For some of us who may be solution-oriented or outcome driven, active listening may be a skill that invites us to stretch beyond our traditional ways of doing things. It can invite us to value helping in ways that might be less tangible than those we are accustomed to. Think: it’s not always about “doing,” sometimes it is about being present, listening, and caring.

We build trust, rapport, and safety with active listening.

As the National Sexual Violence Resource Center notes in their Foundations of Advocacy Training Manual:¹

Strong advocates value survivor-centered approaches. This means practicing flexibility to provide attention and care that best suits each person we work with. We build trust and rapport with survivors and concerned others through active listening. Core to an advocate’s work is listening, noticing verbal and non-verbal cues, and responding in ways that reflect how the survivor defines their needs. There is no standard approach. Active listening requires being present and taking cues from the person you’re working with about what they need.

Being an Effective Listener²

Survivors may be hesitant to share information, and may have faced unsupportive listeners in the past. Although listening may sound like a simple task, there are skills to help an advocate become a more effective listener, and therefore more in tune to the survivor’s wants and needs.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is when we attempt to reflect back what the survivor has said in a shortened form. It allows the survivor to know that we have heard them. It can also highlight what has been said. It can give the survivor space to note whether or not the advocate is on the right track.



Examples of paraphrasing: *“What I think I heard you say was...”* or *“It sounds like...”*

Encouragers

This skill helps to acknowledge that a survivor has been heard and can validate the thoughts and feelings as the survivor is sharing them. Encouragers tend to be natural responses that we use in many conversations. They include nonverbal minimal responses, such as a head nod or positive facial expression. Encouragers also include using minimal verbal responses such as “mm hmm” or “please, go on.” These are used to encourage the survivor to keep talking and acknowledge that they have been heard. On phone calls, encouragers reassure the survivor that we are still present and listening.

Validation

Validation can be used in any conversation to help someone feel more confident in what they are feeling or what they are saying. Validation does not mean agreeing with someone, rather acknowledging that they’ve been heard. While it isn’t an advocate’s job to say what’s “valid” or “invalid,” gentle reminders that whatever one is feeling is okay can be helpful. An example of validation is, *“I hear you; this is all very overwhelming.”*

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions support open sharing and dialogue. These questions do not require a “yes” or “no” answer, but rather, they invite the survivor and concerned others to use their own words and share to the extent of their comfort.

Examples of open-ended question are, *“What was it like after you spoke with your friend?”* or *“How would you like to follow up about connecting at a future time?”* Examples of close-ended questions are: *“Did that make you upset?”* or *“Do you still talk with them?”*

Probing Questions

Probing questions are a type of open-ended question that are used to encourage the survivor to share meaningful information or think deeper about something for the benefit of the survivor. For example, the advocate might ask, *“What do you think would happen if...?”*

It is also important to be aware that the way in which we

ask a question may come across to a survivor as placing blame. Often “why” questions come across as assigning blame or judgment. For example, “Why don’t you want to talk to a therapist?” may sound judgmental. Instead we can ask “how” questions to get to underlying feelings and thoughts. For example, *“How are you feeling about counseling?”*

Reflecting

This is the skill of listening and offering back what the survivor has shared. Similar to paraphrasing, it allows us to highlight emotions that have been expressed and communicates to the survivor that they have been heard.

Reflecting tends to go beyond paraphrasing by also including any insight or reflections an advocate may be able to offer to benefit the survivor. Reflecting can include offering reflections of a wide variety, such as pointing out a survivor’s strengths based on something they’ve shared or noting perceived incongruences between what a survivor says and how they appear. Examples of reflecting are: *“You sound really happy!”* or *“I hear you saying that you’re not angry, but your tone leads me to think you might be.”*

Clarifying & Checking

You can use this skill when you are unsure what the survivor has said or what they mean. Checking in, with minimal interrupting, is likely to lead to less confusion later in the conversation. This skill can also be used to focus on something the survivor said that you didn’t get a chance to address initially.

Advocates can and should admit when confused or having difficulty understanding. An example of clarifying and checking in is: *“I just want to make sure I understand you correctly...”* or *“I think I heard...is that right or did I get it wrong?”*

Summarizing

This skill is used at the end of a conversation to sum up thoughts, feelings, or a plan. This skill can be used in tandem with paraphrasing and clarifying. For example, if a survivor has been talking for a while and you want to ensure you are clear on what has been said. An example of summarizing is — *“It sounds like today has been overwhelming and trying to make a decision today feels*



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Ask the survivor if it is okay to ask a question to get information or clarify something. Be sure to let the survivor know that they do not have to answer the question.



stressful. Based on what you've shared, I wonder if it might be helpful to spend a few days thinking about how you'd like to proceed."

Reframing

This skill is used to offer a new perspective to a situation. It is never intended to invalidate a survivor's perspective, but rather offers additional ways to think about something.

An example could sound like, *"I hear you saying that what happened feels like it was your fault. It sounds to me like this was outside of your control and nothing you could have done would have made this your fault."*

Silence

Allowing space for silence is important in advocacy. Survivors and advocates alike can benefit from quiet that allows time to pause, think, and reflect. After a few minutes of silence, we might say "take your time" to let the survivor know we are still with them.

It can be helpful to consider reasons a survivor could become silent:

- They are trying to gain composure after sharing a deep detail, memory, or feelings that made them feel vulnerable.
- They may disagree with something you've said and are trying to decide how to respond.
- They are digesting the time they have spent with you or the memories about what has happened.
- They are trying to find words.
- They are thinking about how to end the conversation.
- They are losing track of where they are and are having difficulty staying connected to the here and now.
- Their energy level may have waned.
- They are waiting to see what you do next because they are used to people not believing them or judging them.
- Depending on their culture or life experiences, they may have notions about perceived authority of advocates or other helping professionals and may expect directive support, where their role is less active.

Normalizing

This skill is used to let the person you're speaking with know that what they are feeling is common or "normal" and that they aren't bad, wrong, or alone in feeling this way. An example of normalizing: *"I hear you when you say you feel embarrassed for feeling scared all of the time. I also want you to know that fear is a really*

common response that can stick around for a while after a traumatic experience. It isn't anything you need to feel embarrassed about, but I understand how overwhelming and confusing these feelings might be."

Closing

Closing may include summarizing and checking in. Jointly the advocate and survivor can recap important parts of the call and clarify next steps. It is important to provide survivors with information about what they can expect next, as well as resources in the event that they might need anything before you meet again.

An example of closing: *"We have about ten minutes left in our time together today. Would it be okay if we checked in about next steps, as well as any remaining questions you might have that we should connect about today?"*

Assuming the survivor says yes, an advocate can respond to any questions a survivor has, and recap any highlights from the conversation. You can also make space for the survivor to offer thoughts or reflection, confirm dates and times for any future meetings, and reiterate any resource or referral information.



Breathing

This skill is a way of becoming mindful of the moment we're in. Breathing helps us become more fully embodied and has the power to help regulate stress responses.

Breathing practices can help survivors slow down and stay present in the moment.

Similarly, advocates can model breathing techniques that also help regulate their own stress. It can be helpful to work with the survivor on breathing practices they can use on their own, or you can use together, to calm the nervous system and become grounded. If breathing exercises are not something you're familiar with as an advocate, it could be beneficial to do some basic reading on mindfulness techniques or simple breathing exercises.

Listen Unconditionally

An advocate must give the survivor their full attention and avoid doing any busy work during the course of the



interaction. The advocate must pay close attention to what the survivor is saying, how they say it, and what the survivor may not be saying. An advocate might reinforce that they are listening by making neutral responses such as, “Mmmhmm.” Good advocacy generally involves more listening than speaking.

An advocate must be willing to listen to people talk about things that may be difficult to hear. Some survivors may keep details about their experience to themselves for fear that they will hurt the listener. Advocates should continually make it clear that they are willing to hear whatever the survivor wants to share, and that the survivor will not harm them by disclosing details of their experience.

An advocate needs to be prepared to spend time with the survivor, allowing the conversation to proceed at whatever pace the survivor sets. This may involve lengthy silences or listening to a survivor cry. These are natural reactions to talking about sexual violence.

Coded Disclosures

Survivors may talk about sexual violence in vague terms or in ways that may not be obvious: this is referred to as a coded disclosure. People may say things and use language that causes the advocate to consider that something is not being said. The survivor may not have the words or may be choosing not to describe the sexual violence that has occurred. Advocates are encouraged to do their best active listening and to ask respectful clarifying questions when appropriate.

It is also important to consider that coded disclosures may not be verbal at all. In face-to-face advocacy the person may use behavioral and/or physical indicators to tell what has happened to them.

Communicating Meaning

It is important that advocates be aware of the different ways they convey messages. The survivor will be aware not only of what an advocate is saying, but also how it is being said. Tone of voice, pauses in conversation, lowering and raising the voice, and emphasis on specific words, are all examples of how an advocate can communicate meaning.

Responding

In order to respond effectively, it's important for advocates to be aware that no one style of communication is helpful for every survivor. In some cases for example, a survivor may be comfortable with the advocate asking questions, and in other cases a survivor may feel challenged or blamed by questions. If one style of responding does not seem useful for the survivor, an advocate needs to continue the conversation another way.

An effective tool for advocates is to use words that mirror the survivor's words. Keep language simple and clear. Using words that are familiar to the survivor will allow them to be more comfortable and will let the survivor know that the advocate is listening to what the survivor is saying. Another good practice for advocates is to use descriptive explanations, avoiding professional jargon or technical names or abbreviations.

Address Feelings

Individuals respond to sexual violence in a variety of ways, and there is no typical emotional response that an advocate can expect from a survivor. The emotions a person experiences and the ways they express them will vary from survivor to survivor.

Advocates need to be aware that some survivors will express a lot of emotion while others will seem to have less emotion or perhaps no emotion. These reactions may be different from what the advocate anticipates. However, the survivor must be allowed ownership of their feelings, whatever they may be.

The survivor also needs enough time to express emotions, as unexpressed emotions can slow down the healing process. If the survivor does not talk about feelings, an advocate might ask them how they are feeling, either in general, or about a specific issue.

Focusing

Survivors may present several concerns on a call and may have difficulty focusing on one concern at a time. Allow survivors the opportunity to talk about the various situations in their life that may be causing them concern.



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It may be helpful to ask the survivor what “getting over it” means to them. This can help an advocate offer support or can give the survivor an opportunity to talk about methods of healing.



However, at some point in the interaction, it may be necessary to ask the survivor to choose one or two areas to focus on. This will help the survivor to avoid becoming overwhelmed. By working on one concern at a time, the survivor may feel that their situation is much more manageable. Once the survivor has identified their most immediate concerns, the advocate can work with the survivor to explore the situation and generate ideas about how to move forward.



they have already thought of or tried. Then the advocate and survivor can discuss the situation, exploring as many options as possible. Ultimately the survivor will decide which of these options might be best. The advocate might suggest brainstorming to look at the best- and worst-case scenarios for a particular plan of action. While an option may seem appropriate in the short term, it may not be the most helpful or safest plan for the future.

Encouragement

Survivors may overlook or be unable to see the progress they have made. When the advocate provides positive feedback about the survivor's accomplishments, survivors can start to reclaim their power and control. It is equally important to help the survivor understand that setbacks are a natural part of the healing process, and that the goal is forward movement rather than perfection.

An advocate can provide encouragement by:

- Acknowledging steps the survivor has taken to be in charge of their situation.
- Acknowledging the strength and courage it takes to reach out for support.
- Supporting efforts the survivor has taken to address fears, anxiety, depression, etc.
- Pointing out the survivor's coping skill improvements.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a tool to help the survivor with the decision-making process without offering advice. Advocates believe that survivors possess their own answers and may need the opportunity to discuss options to better organize their thoughts.

Advocates might start by asking survivors about things

When brainstorming, the advocate's goal is to be sensitive and respectful of cultural differences that may impact how the survivor might handle their situation. Additionally, people in difficult situations may not see a solution that may seem obvious to an outside observer. Therefore, it is important not to skip the simple suggestions – include these in the brainstorming process.

Responding to Anger

As survivors communicate with advocates, a wide range of emotions from sadness to anger may be shared. It is important that advocates understand that these are appropriate reactions for survivors about their experiences.

At times, advocates may experience survivors directing strong emotions not only toward the offender or others, but toward the advocate as well. The strong emotions could be a result of the sexual violence or could be a complaint by the survivor about a service the advocate or someone else is providing. When this happens, it is important that the advocate calmly ask the survivor to clarify their concern and not direct their anger at the advocate. If a survivor wants to continue the conversation in a respectful way, then the advocate is advised to continue the call. If the survivor continues to direct anger or frustration at the advocate, the advocate can follow center protocol regarding ending a call. Just as survivors deserve the best services advocates can provide, advocates deserve to be treated with respect.



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It is likely that an advocate will speak to survivors who are angry. Anger is an intense emotion that can be overwhelming. When anger builds up, it may become more difficult for a person to function. Sometimes people release their anger in ways that are destructive to themselves or others.

Advocates can help by working with the survivor to think of healthy ways to cope with anger. Methods that work for some people include punching a pillow, going for a walk or a run, or screaming in a private place such as their bedroom or car.



Chapter 10

Active listening is central to the work of advocacy. It is how we make the core principles of advocacy come to life, and is perhaps the greatest skill we can offer in advocacy work.

We use active listening to create safety and support. The advocate's role is to create a safe space in which survivors and survivors' significant others can give voice to their feelings, their fears and to help remind them of their strength and resilience.³

Advocates avoid asking questions that begin with "why." "Why" questions may sound like an interrogation, or may imply that the survivor was somehow responsible for the act of sexual violence that happened to them, or may suggest that the advocate does not believe the survivor.

An effective tool for advocates is to use words that mirror the survivor's words.

Active listening can sound and look like:

- Paraphrasing: *"What I think I heard you say was...."*
- Encouraging: *"Mmmhm" or "Go on."*
- Validating: *"It makes sense that you feel that way."*
- Open-ended questions: *"Tell me more about..."*
- Probing questions: *"What is worrying you most right now?" or "What would it look like if..."*
- Reflecting: *"You sound really frustrated."*
- Clarifying and checking: *"I just want to make sure I understand, you're saying..."*
- Summarizing: *"Sounds like you have X, Y, and Z as a priority."*
- Reframing: *"I hear you questioning your choices, which is so common. You did nothing to cause this."*
- Silence.
- Normalizing: *"After all you've been managing, it is so reasonable and common to feel that way."*
- Closing: *"I want to make sure we answered all of your questions - can we review your next steps before we say goodbye?"*

Endnotes

¹ Used with permission from and thanks to: National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (n.d.) *Foundations of advocacy training manual*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsvrc.org/foundations-advocacy-training-manual>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

