

SCENE

March 2002



Lonne L. Sterling
LMHC, CEAP

Lonne Sterling and Christine Michaels, Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHC) and Certified Employee Assistance Professionals (CEAP) have worked in the mental health, employee assistance and substance abuse fields for over 25 years. They are in private practice in Sarasota and have founded the Center for Change of Florida, providing clients with outpatient counseling and area businesses with employee assistance services. Together they have established a reputation as dynamic professionals, each bring unique and varied experiences to the partnership. Lonne was Director of an Employee Assistance Program and Outpatient Program for one of the area's largest Mental Health Corporations, and successfully managed EAP and Managed Care product lines for 19 major firms and 20 national affiliates. As a Certified Relapse Prevention Specialist, Christine has extensive experience working in addictions with particular expertise in substance abuse assessment, early intervention and prevention. Clinically, both Lonne and Christine are highly skilled in utilizing a brief, solution-focused, therapeutic approach.



Christine Michaels
LMHC, CEAP

For further information or assistance call the Center for Change of Florida at (941) 955-5518..

Is Anybody Out There? Can Anybody Hear Me?

“When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice,
you have not done what I asked.”

When I ask you to listen to me and you tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you try and solve my problems,
you have failed me, as strange as that may seem.

So, please just listen to me.

If you want to talk, wait a few minutes for your turn.

I promise I will listen to you.”

Because we have two ears, most of us assume we must be good listeners. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have all experienced being in a conversation with someone and having the distinct feeling the other person is hearing us but not really listening to what we are saying. You might know this by someone's inattentive facial expressions, gestures and postures; body language can be a sure give away.

There are, however, more subtle kinds of non-listening behaviors you might not notice as they are so commonly used and accepted as part of everyday communication. These are called **listening blocks** because they interfere with effective communication.

Let's take the situation where a husband comes home from work and tells his wife he has had a hard day at the office as he lost a major client. The wife says: “You think you had a hard day; it couldn't have been any worse than mine.” This is a common example of the listening block called *comparing*. The unspoken communication is: “I've had it harder; you don't know what hard is.” The wife heard what the husband had to say but was not listening. Her agenda was more important. If the wife were really listening to her husband, she might have responded with more empathy saying: “I'm so sorry to hear that. Why don't you tell me about it.”

Using the above scenario, the following are examples of the wife's responses demonstrating other common listening blocks:

- “He thinks all I do is sit around each day doing nothing.” (*Mind reading*)
- “You always have a hard day.” (*Selective Hearing*)
- “Oh, you're such a loser” (*Judging*)
- “You *should* have taken the client out to lunch.” (*Moralizing*)
- “You'll get over it.” (*Placating*)
- “It's *my* fault you lost the client.” (*Personalizing*)
- “You have no one to blame but yourself for the mess you're in.” (*Criticizing*)
- “If I were you, I'd give that client a piece of your mind.” (*Advising*)
- “Speaking of that, I lost my car keys today.” (*Diverting*)
- “Unless you close the next deal, I'm going to leave you.” (*Threatening*)

Believe it or not, there are still even more listening blocks, including: *rehearsing, daydreaming, sparring, being right, name calling, diagnosing and reassuring*. We are all guilty of using them at times. But it is their frequent use that results in ineffective communication and problematic interpersonal relationships.

As we hope we've just illustrated, hearing is not the same thing as listening--hearing is passive; listening is active, participatory and responsive. Listening is a collaborative process that requires a give and take of information involving both verbal and non-verbal dialogue. Because the ability to listen is the key element to effective communication, **it is an essential skill for making and keeping healthy relationships.**

Active listening prevents false assumptions and misinterpretations, minimizes the use of communication blocks, helps the listener remember what is said and allows the communicator to feel heard and respected. There are three basic techniques to use for active listening. **Paraphrasing** involves stating in your own words what you think the other person said. The listener is focused on gaining an understanding of the meaning of the communication. **Clarifying**, although similar to paraphrasing, delves deeper into what is being said by asking probing questions to elicit more background information and a fuller understanding of the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. **Feedback** is the point at which the listener shares, in a non-judgmental way, what the listener sensed, thought and felt about the communication.

Here is a short exercise you might try with a partner to improve your communication skills and become a **total listener**:

1. Maintain eye contact;
2. Lean slightly forward, arms uncrossed and relaxed;
3. Reinforce your partner by nodding or paraphrasing;
4. Clarify by asking questions;
5. Don't disagree, argue, correct, interrupt or debate;
6. Respond with open mindedness, empathy and understanding; and
7. Just for fun, take notice of the listening blocks you wanted to but didn't use, then congratulate yourself.