

## The Target System

The Target System is about teaching active listening. Through the years I have come to believe that much of our personal stress has its origins in the way we communicate with the world around us. Oftentimes psychiatric symptoms and even some physical disorders may be generated in part by the stress that we experience due to poor family communications and interpersonal conflict.

*Active listening is a way of letting someone else know that we understand what they are saying or that we somehow understand their experience. In this process we restate what the other is saying. It implies that we are non-judgmental with regards to the other individual's experience.*

Active listening is different from hearing. In hearing we do not necessarily need to respond to the speaker. When we are listening actively, however, we are communicating back to the speaker or sender that we understand their message or experiences. I believe that active listening works best when we have a positive intention and when our responses are focused on the needs of the person that is speaking.

Listening is a primary component of communications and involves both our verbal and non-verbal responses. To listen effectively we need to learn to be mindful of both the information which is being shared by the other as well as being mindful of our own verbal and non-verbal responses.

Active listening is a skill or set of skills which needs to be practiced to be effectively developed. It takes practice and determination to develop mastery and is not acquired overnight. As with the development of many skills we may often need to unlearn acquired habits. Communicating effectively may feel unnatural particularly when we have developed poor habits of communication over the years. It is natural to feel some degree of discomfort as we practice any new skill.

When we use reflective statements we are in fact parroting back what the other person is saying. As we become more skillful we want to sound less parrot-like. As we develop more skill our responses will be perceived as more caring by the speaker.

From my perspective there are two basic parts to effective interpersonal communication. There is a structure that needs to be developed for the speaker and a structure or process that needs to be developed for the sender. Ideally the sender will send information related to their personal experience in a caring and respectful manner. The speaker will refrain from blaming and attacking. The structure for the listener relates to their focus, understanding, and empathy as they respond to the speaker.

As a marriage and family counselor I watch to see that when messages are sent that they are received. Once they are received then what happens to the information. When we send a fax we typically receive a confirmation that the fax has been received. If the fax machine does not print the confirmation we may feel some degree of frustration. We may even feel this frustration in our body accompanied by irritation and at times possibly even anger. After we receive a confirmation, demonstration the completion of our communication we may experience some subtle or minor relief. What would happen if each time we sent a fax we were unable to experience the satisfaction of a completed transaction? Too frequently in families or even work

environments when a message is sent an individual may not receive a response. At times messages may be dropped or responded to in a negative manner. The person sending the message may be criticized or judged in some manner for their experience.

It is important to distinguish between judging an experience and making a judgment regarding an individual's actions. What is it like for us when we send messages to family members, friends, or coworkers and the messages are often or consistently dropped? How much stress is generated in the family or in each individual for that matter? When we are communicating effectively we communicate back to the sender that we understand that which is important to them. I would like to note that we need to make a distinction between a person's experience and their behavior. In my opinion it is ok to point out that we don't like a person's behavior or that we may disapprove of some way they present themselves. Such as yelling, screaming, cursing etc.

Active listening is only one communication tool to that we use when we communicate with others. There are many possible tools we use when we do any activity. A simple analogy might be that of a carpenter's toolbox. A carpenter has several useful tools that he or she uses frequently. Some valuable tools might be a hammer, chisel, rule or measuring instrument, and possibly a hand saw. Although each tool is valuable, the carpenter would use his skill and understanding of the job and select the best choice for any particular job. When using communication tools we need to trust our own intelligence and intuition and select the best communication tool for the job.

The following are is a list of five things which may interfere with effective interpersonal communications. .

1. The first is a tendency to be judgmental. Judging someone else's experience is deadly for communication
2. The second is a tendency for us to shift from speaking role to listening role often without our own awareness. If we make a request for information, than we need to stay in role as a listener at least until the other shares the requested information. At times we may need to stop or pace them for the purpose of reflecting back and clarifying information. After we make a clarification, we than need to continue in role until their transmission has been completed. In my view once we make a request for information we have offered to be in a nurturing or listening role until the information we requested has been shared. If we begin to share our information or experience prior to the other completing their communication we would than have two speakers and no listeners. Two individuals speaking and no one listening, does not lend itself to effective communication and produces conflict.
3. The third major area that causes a breakdown in communication is related to the way the speaker communicates information. Some medicine is easy to swallow and some isn't. How the medicine tastes is one thing. The manner with which it is given is another. It is essential that the speaker structures his or her communication so that it is most likely to be received my speaker. Traditionally we have present structures something like. When you do this I feel this, etc. In this structure the sender is sharing their experience with out attacking the listener. Too often individuals attack or demean the potential listener. As the speaker presents his or herself in an attacking or demeaning manner they often immobilize the potential listener. By their own actions the person desiring to be listened to actually, may prevent the potential listener from nurturing them.

4. Attempting to control the actions of others. By attempting to control the actions of others we often inhibit the flow of communication. We need to be clear about what we are trying to accomplish. If our goal is to control the other's behavior we might want to be honest about our intentions. If we need to be understood we are in a better place to have our concerns received by the potential listener. It is important to make a distinction between understanding and compliance. We need to understand others to facilitate communication. We do not always need to agree with others or comply with others desires to facilitate communication.
5. Not understanding that communication is a process. Often individuals become frustrated because they are not solving simple problems and they don't know why. What if building effective communication were like building a house. It just wouldn't be possible to put the roof on with out building an adequate foundation and structure to support the roof. To solve problems effectively we often need a communication foundation or groundwork in place. Even working with a therapist or family counselor laying this foundation can take time, it can be tedious and frustration. It takes time for us to perfect a skill. And it takes time for our partner or family member to perfect skill also. It is really tough being patient.
6. Defensive responses in all of its various forms inhibit healthy communication. Of course it seems almost natural to be defensive at times. Occasional defensiveness is not so bad. If you are not defensive 70% of the time you are probably passing. Well 80 to 90% would be a lot better. I don't think we even need an A or an A plus. Just pass with a reasonable solid grad that allows room for human error. There are various forms of defensiveness. Remember defensive behavior inhibits communication. Try to distinguish between defensive behavior and a need to take care of yourself or communicate to the other your discomfort if they are being demeaning or abusive. Take care, however, not to brand them as abusive or demeaning if they are legitimately sharing their personal experience. If you are unsure, listen to their words and the way they are structuring their communication. It is essential that we work at being honest with ourselves.

I strongly believe that **The Target System** is an excellent way of helping us reduce defensive behavior and improving interpersonal communication skill. With daily practice it can help lay a solid groundwork to support effective problem solving and conflict resolution.

