

Family Life Boosters (7) - Listen

In the Greek listen is the word *akouó* which means to hear, to comprehend by hearing, to understand, to take heed. It is the same root for the English word, acoustics. In Hebrew it is the word *sama* which means to listen, to obey and to yield to.

Attentiveness is the word, *Ekkremamai* in Greek which means to hang upon the lips of a speaker. It is an attitude of concentration or readiness.

James 1:19

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

Everyone includes leaders, husbands, fathers, children and wives. All family members must be good listeners. In the Bible and also in our local cultures there is a positive correlation between listening and good behaviour. For example, in Shona, my home language, the term Musikanzwa (non-listening) is the word for naughty. The naughty child is the “non-listening” child. If we want to raise up a righteous generation we must train our children to listen to and obey the voice of their parents.

God listens to our prayers. He pays attention to them. God is a good listener.

1 Peter 3:12

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

REFLECTIONS

When was the last time you set aside time to solely listen to someone important to you (as opposed to setting aside time to tell someone something)?

Do you plan what to listen to, as opposed to just planning what you will say? If you want to build your listening muscle, you need to consider planning how and when you will listen.

Do people talk about how great you are or how great you have made them?

When people share their opinion do you automatically start sharing yours or do you draw them out?

How do you start conversations? Do you ask people how they are doing in a conditioned way but then don't listen?

“Real communication happens when we feel safe” (Ken Blanchard). What are you doing to make your family members feel safe around you?

“The most called upon prerequisite of a friend is an accessible ear.” Maya Angelou, the Heart of a Woman

Often we blame other things for our poor attentiveness. Who or what do you blame?

Are you creating meaningful spaces for your family members' stories to be heard? There are certain stories that will only be told when the right questions are asked and when a safe environment is created. Instead of forcing your family members to talk, focus on creating the right environment as a social architect.

Let's take a long hard look at ourselves and assess our listening skills.

Eccl 3:7

...a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak

John Vawter, "The truth is, I interrupt because I like to control conversations. I want them to follow my agenda, to proceed at my pace, to end where I would like them to end. Because of that I am quick to speak...slow to listen."

Often it is easy to talk, convince, and persuade. We often have the mindset that we have the best thoughts to share but in doing so we are missing out on a whole world of ideas that could enrich us, this is pride. The person who is the most influential in a conversation is actually the one who speaks second not first. When I only speak after having first listened to you, I can use fodder from what you have said as I engage and propose. If you are struggling with talking too much and not listening, give yourself the "silent" test. For how long can you be quiet in a conversation? Quiet and engaged not quiet and detached. We honour God's creation by being attentive to it.

What are some benefits of listening?

Listening builds up your family members in at least three aspects of their self-esteem. They will feel more significant as a person; that sense of "I matter!" They will feel a greater sense of worth; "my perspective is worth hearing". They will feel more secure; "I am loved and prioritized. There is no competition with your work or hobbies or their siblings. Listening helps to prevent isolation. The other does not feel alone. This feeling of Isolation is one of the biggest marriage killers, hence the importance of addressing emotional intimacy in marriage. Listening draws out the subconversations. People operate in layers and often it takes real listening to get someone to unravel those layers. Often your family members may be protesting. Instead of reacting to the protest rather listen for the subconversation. This is the thing they really want to communicate but can't find the words or just don't feel safe. For example, your spouse might say to you, "You are working too hard and don't have time for your health and for the children!" Instead of reacting, a good response would be: "Oh this seems to have affected you. Why do you feel so strongly about this?" After 10 minutes of listening to her she says "I guess I am just missing you..." That's the subconversation. She feels safer to communicate her real needs when she knows you are truly listening.

Listening also helps you to scratch where it's really itching. Listening builds emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy is built one conversation at a time. For those who are married it often results in sexual intimacy. Often we make demands for sexual intimacy without taking time to build emotional intimacy. Finally, listening helps you to understand your family members. Listening is the primary vehicle for truly learning about your family members. Who are they and what do they need from me now?

Why don't we listen?

Proverbs 18:2

Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.

When we don't listen, it shows that we are fools and do not desire understanding. Listening gives you understanding. If you want to understand your spouse, learn to listen. If you want to understand your siblings, learn to listen.

We know that listening is important in family, so why don't we practise it as much as we would like? When we understand how our behaviour was learned it becomes easier to unlearn it.

Here are a number of reasons why we don't listen to our family members: We don't listen because we think we already know; we think we have a solution and assume that is all they want; we generally have a superiority complex that thinks it has figured out the other person, this is often based on pride.

Proverbs 12:15

The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice

Sometimes we don't listen because we assume that our family members are the same everyday. We forget that people change, hence we presuppose that today's narrative will be the same as yesterday's. This is a myth. Another reason for not listening is impatience. The reality is that relationships and efficiency is an oxymoron. Relationships require time. Listening requires time. Maybe we are not used to listening. Listening is a habit that you build. Many people have not given themselves time to develop listening habits. As an executive coach I am paid to listen; but for people who come from a background of only telling, listening can be very difficult. It's important to switch roles. One girl said to another: "I can only stand him for an hour. He gets tired of listening after that." Just because you are always telling at work does not mean telling will work at home.

Proverbs 18:13

"He who answers a matter before he hears it. It is folly and shame to him."

Uncontrolled talking hinders listening. We are often so busy talking and as a result there is no room for listening. *Elaine St James in Inner Simplicity said, "It's amazing how much you can hear when no one is saying anything."*

Poor listening is sometimes because people struggle with emotional intimacy. When people start to really listen it brings them closer and is extremely powerful. As a result, we may become uncomfortable with the vulnerability or awkwardness it produces. People stop listening sometimes because they are task-oriented problem solvers. That's not always what your siblings, children or family members need. Sometimes they want to talk just to process their thoughts. Sometimes they are talking for their own benefit and not yours. Be there for them. Sometimes we don't listen because no one ever listens to us. This can be a form of revenge. We have made an inner vow, "Why should I listen if no one ever listens to me?" Learn to forgive. It's not tit for tat. If you are the better listener, be a role model. Some people struggle to listen because they are always talking. They feel the need to fill the gaps created by uncomfortable silence. When a relationship is healthy we can be comfortable with silence. New York Times: *Sometimes the news is in the noise and sometimes the news is in the silence.*

We don't listen because we often practise counterfeits to true listening like *selective hearing*; only listening when it is to do with something that interests you. Other examples of such counterfeits are, tuning out when you don't like the content, pretending to listen, listening only to the highlights or headlines, and many people listen enough just to reply instead of listening to understand. True listening is an art anyone can master, and it is a major family life booster.

Here are some listening tips

Look them in the eyes and also watch their body language; actively demonstrate interest in their subject matter as this will encourage them to share more deeply; get rid of the internal noise in your head; choose a place where you are not easily distracted; ask them creative questions that they have never been asked before; practice the 10 minute silence rule and just listen; position yourself as an equal not a superior. Finally, understand their goals for talking to you, are they just missing you and want your attention, picking your brain, needing a solution or just needing to be heard for a change. Practise active listening. This is the art of communicating that you are indeed listening and making the other person feel heard.

Here are some phrases you can use:

e.g. "...In other words....I hear you saying...So what you are saying is....So you think we should.....You're feeling that...I think I hear you saying...Do I understand you correctly?...Would you please tell me more about..."

Short responses help: Tell me more; Wow; Really; And then what; Go on; That's so useful, what else?....

Questions to draw people out: Give me a little background: how did that come about?" "Can you tell me a little more about this?" "Run me through exactly what happened." "What did you mean when you said _____?" "Give me an example of what you are talking about, with specific details." "What do you want in this situation? What outcome are you shooting for?" "What makes this important to you?" "What's behind this?" "How is this affecting you? What bothers you most about the situation?"

What are the consequences of NOT listening to your family members?

What happens when you fail to listen to your family members? You end up ministering to the wrong thing, missing the mark. It's like misreading the exam question. They feel isolated and rejected resulting in emotional betrayal. The need is so strong that they inevitably find someone else to listen. If that person is of the opposite sex this leads to unhealthy levels of intimacy. Where your words go your emotions soon follow. When they don't feel heard it results in emotional distance, which has a strong impact on sexual intimacy and trust levels often resulting in suspicion and paranoia. When you don't listen to your family members it will affect your growth because a lot of what your family members says to you is in the form of feedback. Your responsibility with feedback is to understand it NOT to defend. People who don't listen to their family members never get to understand them. Ask yourself "How has what she has just said helped me to better understand her? Of what are they afraid? What is stressing them?" If you don't listen to each other your relationship becomes superficial. The networks of men tend to be wider but shallower than those of women. Men need to go deeper by opening up a closed spirit through genuine listening. Some people only open up when they know that someone is fully present listening.

Sometimes we are not attentive to the right things. You will always give attention to something, make sure it is what God says you must give attention to.

Ecclesiastes 7:21-22

Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—22 for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

Hebrews 2:1

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

There are consequences to not paying close attention to the right things.

Titus 1:13-14

This saying is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith 14 and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth.

To what do you pay most attention?

Nehemiah 8:3

"Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law".

You can be attentive for long (pray for this) – daybreak to noon.

"Listen or thy tongue will keep thee deaf" (Native American proverb).

Listening is a key to greatness. It is a key to learning. To gain empathy, listen with your eyes, heart and ears. Remember that people have a desire to be understood. One of the destroyers of marriages is when husbands do not listen to their wives. We often filter things through our own perspective instead of trying to understand another's frame of reference. When people are in trouble they want to share with someone who will give them all the time to listen. Make time for listening, it is a sign of honour. The cornerstone of genuine empathy is the ability to be with

someone in her pain or happiness. Empathy is easy to learn. Pay attention to what is left unsaid. Read body language. This generation is looking for depth, authenticity and empathy. It is easy to recognize empathy when you are the beneficiary. People value efficiency, however it is often efficiency for things not people. Empathy takes time. It is only when you are on the same page about what's important that efficiency with people is effective.

Conclusion

What bad listening habits do you need to stop?

What are you going to start doing differently?

What are the listening opportunities you have today?

Is there anything of which you need to repent?