

BASIC COMMUNICATIONS

Sitting, Active Listening, Breathing

Sitting

The first basic skill is sitting, finding a comfortable seat. This does not mean just finding a chair to sit in, but a comfortable seat to be in, so that one is not standing over the bed or sitting above or below eye level, physically. Nor is one taking an internal view from above or below. One is trying to find a place without judgment or assumption or expectation of outcome.

It means finding that comfortable distance and direction so that communication can happen of its own accord. Seats facing each other may or may not be appropriate according to the relationship of the individuals. Sometimes, sitting side by side facilitates sharing. Not a “you tell me what is happening,” but rather “let me try to see from your point of view.” The skill of sitting comes from a place of waiting, humility and acceptance.

Active Listening

The second basic skill is active listening, being a receptor. The practicing of this skill can occur before one word is spoken, on either side. To sit at a bedside and receive the breathing pattern of another, the smile or look of sorrow or longing or sadness or pain or annoyance, is to begin to hold the container that permits whatever is happening to continue to happen, but to happen with a compassionate witness.

Actively listening is being able to listen without the need to respond immediately or with what you may think about what is being said. It is about reflecting back what you are hearing and listening to, acknowledging that there are feelings within the person speaking, and very importantly, waiting for the solutions, if any, to come from the speaker. For example: when I hear you use the word “home”, I am also listening to the pause after you use the word. What happens in that pause?

Active listening from a comfortable seat is a skill that can be a gift of extraordinary intimacy because you can engage in the truth of someone else’s moment of experience with all your attention.

Breathing

A third basic skill is breathing. In Hospice work, we will regularly come up against our “inadequacy”. At some time, the seat we have found most comfortable and the listening attention we have come to depend upon will meet the perversely irrational or stubbornly intractable situation or person that can shut down our listening heart and unseat our intention. And if we are unseated and unlistening, chances are we have stopped breathing. And, not is the time to breathe.

Breathing is the first and last skill we use in our living. In the practice of being with the breath, we can experience a centeredness from which all our doing can be viewed for what it is.

Breathing awareness is not meant just for practice on the cushion. From a practice of breathing at the bedside, we can see our talents, and skills and intentions, how well they can work and where they can miss, how capable we can be and how another may be more so. We can even appreciate our inadequacy as the best we can give in the moment. We can be sufficient to the moment when we breathe from our center.

Is there any better gift of service than to hold this as true for those whose use of their breathing skills are ending?

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