



*Sanctuary in
Jesus*

Week 3 - Part 2

The Power of the
Pause

The Power of the Pause!

In the first week we looked at the facets of active listening and why it is important. Last week we worked through using open questioning to build our connection with and understanding of the speaker.

This week we will be examining the vital importance of pausing when the speaker has finished and before we respond.

Quick note: Throughout this section we are continuing to refer to the person who has raised an objection or shared something as “the speaker” and the person on the receiving end as “the listener” even though we are now beginning to talk about responding.

Why Pause

Bluntly, if we have achieved a solid level of active listening, we will have been focussed on what the person is saying, their inflection, emotions, their pauses and emphases. Processing all that information as it comes in, means we should not have been planning what we want to say back. Therefore, we won't have a response ready to go!

Believe it or not, this is the goal of active listening.

So therefore, we need to create the space to inwardly digest the overall meaning of what has been offered to you and begin to recalibrate our brain to responding. If we rush this process, we will likely pull out a tried and tested habit-based response that we learnt when people challenged us or told us off when we were young.

Your turn

In your group, take turns to read the Eight deadly "sins" section together.

Eight deadly “sins” of responding (by Brené Brown)

Sharing something vulnerable or challenging someone’s beliefs feels the same as deliberately stepping into a storm. With a familiar trusted confidant, we can be confident they will act as an anchor for us, but where there has been disagreement or we don’t know or trust the listener, we are braving that storm alone.

Active listening is throwing that person the first safety line. Your response, however, may cause you to cut the line or throw them another. These are eight response types you definitely want to avoid unless you want to become a piece of flying debris in their storm.

1. I feel sorry for you – sympathy not empathy.

The listener who responds with sympathy (“I feel so sorry for you”) rather than empathy (“I get it, I feel with you, and I’ve been there”). The subtext of this response is distance: These things don’t happen to me or people like me. If you want to see someone shift from vulnerable to shamed throw in a “Oh bless you.”

2. OMG! You’re so awful for that – shaming and judging in one toxic cocktail.

The listener hears the issue and actually feels shame for the speaker. They gasp and confirm how horrified they should be. Then there is an awkward silence. In effect you’ve just made it the speaker’s job to make you feel better by convincing you they are not a terrible person.

3. Can’t believe you think that, you’ve let me down – disappointment.

The listener who needs the speaker to be a pillar of worthiness and perfection. This person cannot help the speaker because they are too disappointed in the speaker’s newly identified imperfections. A common scenario is hearing a mentor or someone you felt was secure in faith express doubts or questions.

4. *This feels terrible, I feel bad hearing that. Who can we blame? Are you to blame? – Discharging our discomfort by blaming others.*

Shame is visceral and contagious, we can feel it for other people. In this response though, the listener is looking to get rid of their shame-discomfort by blaming and scolding. With no other options available, this reaction often leads to blaming/scolding the speaker “What were you thinking?”

In other situations, this reaction can take aim at an absent third party, “Who told you that? We’ll go deal with them.” This reaction is very common between parents and children! In that situation it is often prefaced with a quick shaming of the child “How did you let this happen?” thrown in for good measure.

5. *Don’t worry about that! I’m sure that will be better tomorrow/next month – minimising or avoiding the issues raised.*

We all minimise and avoid when we want hard feelings to go away. Here the listener, out of their own discomfort, refuses to acknowledge the speaker is hurting/angry/confused. Common phrases that pop up here are: “You’re exaggerating. It wasn’t that bad. You rock! You’re perfect as you are. Everyone loves you.”

6. *If you think that’s bad! – comparing or competing.*

In this case the listener confuses connecting with the speaker over shared experiences with the opportunity to one-up them. Ever said this: “That’s nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!”

7. *I can’t believe you said that to them?! – uncomfortable speaking truth to power.*

This one is a complicated one. It’s another example of the listener feeling a mixture of shame and fear for the speaker, where the speaker has said something to someone the listener feels is on a

pedestal. It crops up in many situations from work to home life to church. If you feel it's wrong to ask questions of the priest or interrupt them or to challenge a bishop, you could fall into this.

Signature phrases are: "I can't believe you said that to your boss?!" or "You can't say things like that to them!"

8. Have you tried X? or You need to do Y. – problem solving/ advice-giving.

Sometimes when we see someone struggling our first instinct is to fix it. This is especially true for those of us whom people seek out to help with problem-solving generally. It can be hard to switch out of fixing mode and rather than listening and responding to the speaker's situation with empathy, the listener dives straight into fixing and problem solving.

Your turn

Which of the above do you recognise in yourself?

We often have more than one!

Foundations of a good response

We don't sit and stare into space while we pause. We use the time to process both what we've heard and our initial reactions. At first this can make the pause feel like a furious burst of agitated thinking. This is likely because we are still rushing to deliver some kind of response. Instead try to relax and take the time to stroll instead of running. With that in mind walk through these four steps, note which parts you do already, and which ones are new to you.

1. Fully absorb and consider what has been shared.

This is an intuitive process and as such it is impossible to list all the factors you could consider. Here is a checklist to get you started (as a memory prompt, these steps backwards spell out MECK):

Key points - Mentally highlight their key points.

Clarity - Evaluate how clearly they see the issues, or whether other factors like tiredness or upset are causing them to crowd lots of unrelated topics together.

Emotions - List their sacred held truths – i.e. where they demonstrated they feel strongly.

Missing - Consider what they haven't said.

This process gets quicker with practise but always takes time. Get used to pausing and running through the list.

If you feel the need to reassure your conversational partner during the wait, try having a few phrases ready to go that will let them know you're still engaged with them e.g. "I'm mulling through what you've said." Or "I'm still with you, I am just thinking about that."

2. Examine your reaction to what you absorbed.

Do NOT skip this stage.

This stage is how we avoid slipping into one of the 8 deadly sins of responding!

Note parts that particularly struck you.

Identify any parts that you're unclear on.

Be curious about what emotions their speech generated in you. Recognise them, label them, and decide if they're useful to this person - usually our emotions are just information for us. If we realise we've had a strong emotional reaction, e.g. anger, pity, shame, or revulsion, it's vitally important we deal with ourselves before responding. Skip to step 4 and exit the conversation in a positive way with an agreement to circle back round at an agreed time.

3. Bring the speaker's explanation alongside your understanding.

Find the gaps and where the views vary. This is a granular approach not a 10,000 feet survey. If you've only got "They don't believe in God" you've missed all their foundations and reasons. Go back and ask open questions. If you have: "they don't believe in God because they can't see any scientific evidence of God in the world but they do see a lot of suffering" you have a veritable mountain of options to begin to look back and forth from how you manage that issue to what information they may be missing altogether. From here you can begin to build a response but not before you finish this process and go to step 4.

4. The ONLY first response.

Yes, only one, always.

No exceptions

The only first response that maintains connection is gratitude and recognition.

It's simple, deceptively simple. Thank them for sharing. Acknowledge their bravery or honesty or integrity, whatever it cost them to speak up.

I admit there are times this is hard to do. If someone has been ranting at us it can be hard to keep our cool. In these instances, I confess, I take a perverse pleasure in taking a deep breath then sincerely thanking them for sharing, acknowledging they had not told me that before and watching them deflate.

Please note, gratitude and recognition only work if they are sincere. We have an inbuilt radar for patronising or sarcastic insincerity honed by years of school "friends", difficult colleagues and/or siblings.

Lastly, thanking someone does not indicate we will shift our ground. It simply underlines that the speaker has been heard and valued.

Your turn

Discuss which of the steps above you find, or believe you will find, easy or hard.

How does it make you feel to thank someone for explaining why they disagree with you?

Social pressure to be quick

For most of our lives we learn and then reinforce the idea that quick = smart. From the sidelines, we quietly admire the quick-witted comedian for churning out a speedy one-line quip in response to someone else's comment. Yet when you are the butt of the joke it feels very different.

We've all had *that* teacher or boss who demands fast solutions, whereas truthfully the best option is nearly always the thought out and planned one. Your teacher/boss is doing nothing more than off-loading their stress on you, or even worse, believing the pressure will motivate you to perform better. Neither are true or good, our nervous systems may respond and go into high gear but that always comes at a cost of reducing nutrient flow to the frontal cortex – our logical, thinking brain.

So why do we feel a quick response is desirable?

If we have just presented a project we're passionate about, and the response from the listeners was instant, it doesn't matter whether it was a good or bad response, we feel slighted, that our effort has not been valued, or even made to feel silly for bringing up something obvious.

The only result of a quick response is to demonstrate your reflex, go-to reaction.

The truth is people avoid pausing because when we start to practise pausing, it's actively uncomfortable. It's itchy, twitchy, foot-shuffling uncomfortable. This sensation gets better, but at the start we need to be prepared to be uncomfortable for a minute or more. The best way to work through this is to distract yourself by getting busy on the four steps above.

It's not just us that feels uncomfortable, often the speaker will too. They may start nudging for a response "What do you think?" What they're truly asking for is confirmation you are still engaged and connected with them. In these instances, having a comfortable go-to phrase that acts as a holding pattern while reassuring the speaker you are still there is invaluable. It's worth developing your own authentic words here but here are a couple of examples: "Say, that's a lot you shared there, I need a moment to think about that." Or "Thank you for sharing that, I want to take a moment to consider all you've said and make sure I answer you honestly and fully, because I don't want to miss any of your points."

The take home here is, contrary to popular belief, a pause reflects respect for the speaker, and gives both parties time to adjust to the listener becoming the speaker.

Your turn

In your group, take it in turns to talk for one minute on either a hot topic from the news this week or one of the suggestions below from the first part of the course:

- **I feel I am a tourist/seeker in faith because...**
- **When I contemplate giving Jesus authority over my relationships/actions/finances I feel...**
- **I feel I need XX to be able to believe Jesus is my saviour.**

Listeners, practise actively listening, open questions, then practise the pause steps 1-4.

At the end feedback to each other how that felt and swap round.