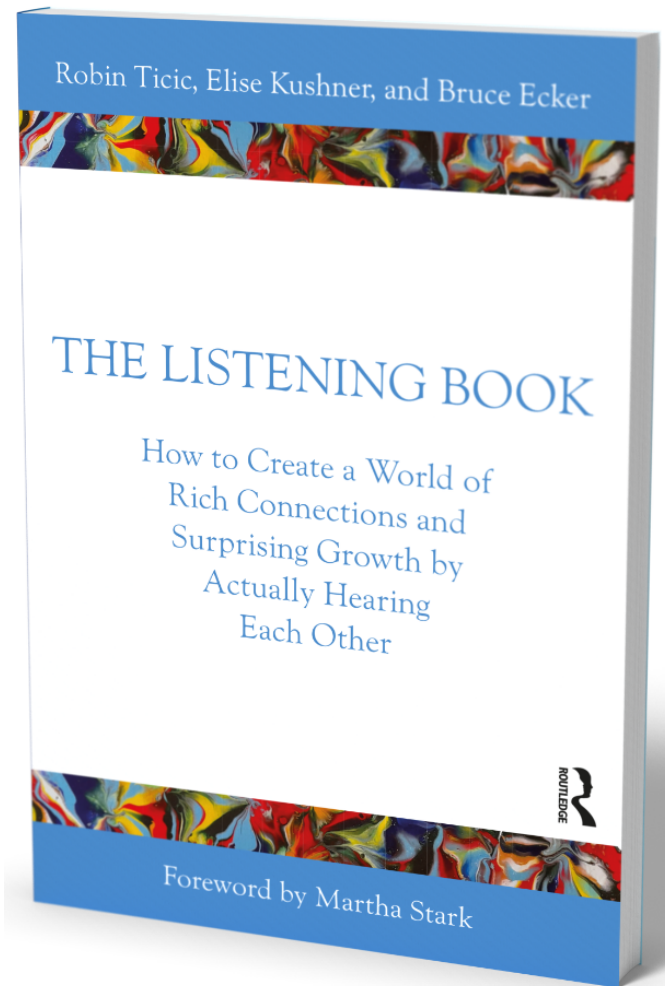


The Listening Book is for everyone who yearns for deeper emotional connection and closeness, everyone who is at a loss to understand what is interfering, and everyone who is fascinated by the subtle and manifold factors involved in interpersonal communication.



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If you thought you knew what listening is and does, get ready for a mind- and heart-opening journey of discovery. —**Diane Poole Heller, PhD**, *author of The Power of Attachment*

It's really a gem, a delightful and comprehensive guide to one of the most important human skills. —**Rick Hanson, PhD**, *author of Hardwiring Happiness and Making Great Relationships*

You'll see so clearly how certain comments help people feel understood, while other seemingly innocuous responses alienate and distance... a gem of a book. —**Diana Fosha, PhD**, *developer of AEDP and editor of Undoing Aloneness and the Transformation of Suffering into Flourishing*

A magnificent piece that will most certainly prove to be an invaluable resource for anyone with a heart and the desire to forge more meaningful connectedness with others. —**Martha Stark, MD**, *Faculty, Harvard Medical School, and award-winning author of nine books on psychoanalytic theory and practice*

Excerpts from...

THE LISTENING BOOK

How to Create a World of
Rich Connections and
Surprising Growth by
Actually Hearing
Each Other

by Robin Ticic, Elise Kushner, and Bruce Ecker

Preface

Each time one of our psychotherapy clients tells us, “You’re the first person who has ever really listened and tried to *understand* me!” we are struck yet again by how many people go through life without ever feeling really listened to, really heard, and really understood on a deep level by their closest people. Can those among us who haven’t had the good fortune to receive such listening, understanding, and connection possibly provide that to *their* most important people? In living without feeling heard, one soldier on, enduring a nameless despair and desolation of disconnection and aloneness, even when others are physically present, and without necessarily recognizing what’s missing because it just seems to be the nature of human life. Depression is in many cases the mood of feeling hopelessly stranded in that disconnection and aloneness.

What explains the rarity of high-quality listening? Perhaps the cause of its rarity can be found in the very essence of such listening: You park yourself in silence, you forget about time, you forget about yourself, and you give the entire attention of your mind and heart to the other person. In other words, such listening is done from a state of mind that is relatively egoless. Could the unfamiliarity of that stance be why it’s rare? If so, then cultivating not only the skills but also, more fundamentally, the *capacity* for that stance of true listening will be a major gain for the listener, a gain that could be viewed as spiritual growth.

Giving high-quality listening to someone is an act of remarkable loving-kindness that actually connects two selves internally. What can emerge from attuned listening and the connection it creates, beyond how good it feels in the moment to both receiver and giver, is also remarkable. People’s behaviors, emotions, and thoughts that sometimes seem senseless or irrational when viewed from an external perspective, prove to make complete sense. That coherent sense exists and operates in a person’s *interior* world of meaning, which actually becomes apparent when deep listening goes there. Recognizing the coherence of one’s own inner world is an illumination that can be freeing and life-changing. It can in turn engage the brain’s innate capability to unlock the emotional conditioning of a lifetime through the process of *memory reconsolidation*, which we now understand thanks to neuroscience research since 2000 and extensive use of that process in psychotherapy. It is a natural process that occurs and creates liberating change also in daily life outside of psychotherapy. Each of us is equipped with this capability for change, and we can greatly help each other make use of it through...listening.

Introduction: We change our world by listening

It's literally true: You can change the world by listening. In fact, you already do! We all do. Every choice we make about how to interact with others has ripple effects, making people's lives different from how they would have been without us.

By honing our listening skills, all of us have the opportunity to enrich our interpersonal relationships dramatically, minimize conflicts, and maximize peaceful, respectful interactions with partners, children, relatives, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and colleagues. Each of us again and again has the possibility to change the world into a place of more caring, kindness, understanding, and acceptance of one another.

Have you experienced relationships in which you feel free to express what you're really feeling, free to be your authentic self, being heard and seen and accepted as you are? If you can easily think of such a relationship, then you are truly fortunate. If you can't think of such a relationship at this moment and you long to be heard—really *listened to* and *understood*—then please know that you share that longing with the vast majority of people around the world.

Just imagine feeling free to share any problem with a friend, knowing you'll simply be deeply understood...and not told what you should or shouldn't be feeling, believing, or doing. Imagine parents giving their children sensitive understanding of what they're feeling, experiencing, and needing, rather than failing to register or even disregarding all that, as though how they're feeling doesn't matter.

We humans have an innate need for deep, rich connections of these kinds. We need to feel accepted and validated by others who are close to us. And in fact, such connection with *ourselves* is just as necessary as with others—though this is a novel idea to many people. Giving ourselves kindness and understanding dispels much inner conflict and distress, and makes room for inner shifts toward greater well-being.

All this is *true* wealth in life—a major source of happiness and stability. There's so much that we tend to strive for that we don't really need, and that therefore doesn't fulfill us even when attained. And all along, we can give and receive more of what we really *do* need for mental and emotional well-being.

The art of listening is the path to fulfilling those needs. We're talking about *conscious, intentional* listening for deep and empathic understanding of a person—a capability that is fascinating to cultivate and a joy to use! You'll discover that learning about people by listening to them—yourself included—is generally the path of greatest satisfaction as well as least resistance, because virtually everyone wants to feel heard and understood. Listening is what connects us and brings to life the feeling that we are in one big human family.

Perhaps you're wondering why the focus here is on the “listening” part of interpersonal communication—which consists of both listening *and* speaking. In our experience, it's listening that's more difficult and less developed for most people. Insufficient listening is most often the cause when an interaction leaves one or more participants feeling alone and hurt.

We want to inspire you to look for opportunities to apply what you learn here to your relationships: listening to, hearing, and understanding the people in your life, allowing you to respond to them in new ways and at new levels, making your interactions with them more alive, more authentic, and more satisfying for you and for them.

We psychotherapists have spent much of our lives listening to people as practitioners of Coherence Therapy, all along working on ourselves to become better and better at listening to our clients,

hearing all that they are telling us verbally and nonverbally, and guiding them to pay attention and listen to themselves at new levels that produce deep, lasting change.

And yet, what's different about high-quality listening is how simple it is, not how complex it is. There's nothing mysteriously intricate or inscrutable about the skills and stances of such listening. They are readily learnable by almost everyone—and are simple because such listening requires “simply” that we stop doing many things we might normally do in reaction to what another person communicates. Instead, we stay closely with what was said or otherwise communicated, without giving advice or making any attempts to change anything about the person. We just meet that person right where he or she is. Of course, two individuals in a relationship may be at quite different points on the listening learning curve. That can entail a mutual adjustment having various delicate aspects. Although *simple* isn't necessarily *easy*, we think you'll find the rewards well worth the investment!

PART 1

Listening in: 52 revealing experiences of attunement and non-attunement

The accounts begin

The stories here in Part 1 of the book come from real life and real interactions between people. They are presented in a special format, with every story offering you a unique learning experience.

The speaker in each story tells about a meaningful experience with some other person—the listener. Sometimes it goes well, but more often than not there's an “ouch” moment for the speaker when the listener's response is significantly misattuned. You'll be invited into the emotional world of the speaker, who will explain how that experience feels.

We then rewrite the stories of misattunement with responses from the listener that make the speaker feel satisfyingly heard and understood. (In those altered replays, the portions of text that are repeated appear a shade lighter.)

It's the speaker's experience of the listener that is the overt focus of each story—because that's the best way for you, the reader, to advance your listening skills. That way, you'll be vicariously experiencing both roles, the speaker and the listener. In the position of the speaker, you'll be sampling how it feels to receive either the needed good listening or the “ouch” of poor listening. In the position of the listener, you will recognize some of your own skillful and less-than-skillful listening responses to others, and of course you'll expand your repertoire of skillful responses. What could be more effective for vividly understanding how to be a good listener?

What about the *speaker's* ability to listen and really hear and receive the responses of a good listener? The speaker in each story is the person who happens to be having an emotional experience, whether troubling or joyous, and wants or needs to tell the other person about that experience, often to help clarify it. So a good listener doesn't expect the speaker, who is in the midst of an emotional experience, to be able to use his or her best listening skills at the same time. High-quality listening responses are ones that an emotional speaker can most fully hear and let in. The invaluable effects of better listening to *oneself* also become apparent.

The stories highlight patterns that people often use in everyday communication—patterns that are interpersonal “connectors” as well as many that are interpersonal “disconnectors.” Every time a connector is used and the speaker feels heard and understood, you'll see a “heart-and-ear” icon. And when the speaker feels especially pained by not being heard and understood, you'll find an “ouch” icon.

Story 1: Olivia

Background

Hey, I'm Olivia, 17 years old. You won't believe what's been going on! My boyfriend, Tony, dumped me for another girl! After we were together for six whole months. That's a really long time, and I was sure it would last forever. I didn't see this coming. I've had other boyfriends, but they were so superficial compared to Tony, the great love of my life.

I cry all day. I wake up in the middle of the night and realize I was crying in my sleep. It hurts so much. I spent the first day—it's been six days now—trying to make it not be true, but it kept being true. I spent the second and third days realizing that I couldn't change reality and there was nothing more I wanted to live for. I thought about killing myself. Fortunately for me, my mom kept a close eye on me and helped me through that. Then I fell into a deep depression, where I've been stuck for the last few days. Will the pain ever end?

I don't really want to talk to anyone, because I'm convinced no one can understand how deep my pain goes. My cousin Mia called—she's 18—and my mom told her I didn't want to talk to anyone, but Mia knew I was really, really down and she wouldn't take no for an answer, so she came over anyway earlier today.

What happened

Me (Olivia) (*joyless, flat, not wanting to talk to Mia*): Hey, Mia, what's up.

Mia: What's up with you? How're you doing? I've been worried sick about you.

Me (Olivia) (*totally flat*): I'm okay.

Mia: Oh, I'm sooo glad to hear you're okay! That means sooo much to me!



DISCONNECTOR – disregarding signals of distress or need

What I'm feeling

How come Mia heard my words “I'm okay” but didn't notice that I didn't *look* or *sound* okay? I haven't washed my hair in a week, and I'm obviously depressed. But she seems to be ignoring clear signs that I'm in a bad state. It's as if she's listening for what she *wants* to hear, rather than actually tuning in to *me*.

Mia: I've been beside myself with worry.

Me (Olivia) (*not knowing what to say*): Yeah...

Mia: You've given us all a scare! I could hardly sleep I was so worried about you.



DISCONNECTOR – shifting the focus onto oneself, specifically:

burdening the sufferer with one's own worries

It feels as if she's pressuring *me* to make *her* feel better, when *I'm* the one in huge pain right now. It feels weird that she's dumping *her* worries on *my* shoulders.

I wish people could notice my obvious condition, not just the words I say. When I said “I’m okay” it was just to fill the silence and get her off my back, but I definitely didn’t look or sound okay in any way!

I’m the one who was dumped by the love of my life, and I’m the one who’s in this intense pain *all the time*. It feels like an unfair and impossible burden for me to deal with not only my feelings but also Mia’s feelings about *my* issue. Mia really let me down in a big way by being so blind to that and pulling at me to make *her* feel better. She isn’t the friend I thought she was—and that’s yet *another* loss at the same time!

What I needed instead

Me (Olivia) (*joyless, flat, not wanting to talk to Mia*): Hey, Mia, what’s up.

Mia: I just came to check up on you – I’ve been thinking about you.

Me (Olivia) (*totally flat*): I’m okay.

Mia: Hmm, I don’t think so. I’m not *that* easy to fool! And I know how bad it hurts to be dropped by a boyfriend. Look, I’m here for you, okay? If you want to talk or maybe need a shoulder to cry on, just let me know, okay?



CONNECTOR – noticing incongruence among words, emotions, and behaviors

CONNECTOR – acknowledging what you’re noticing, specifically:

expressing caring recognition of visible distress rather than going along with disregarding it

CONNECTOR – offering an expression of interest and caring understanding

Me (Olivia): Yeah...okay.

Mia (*giving Olivia a hug*): Okay, sweetie, is it alright if I drop by tomorrow for a couple of minutes?



CONNECTOR – showing warmth and generosity of spirit, specifically:

offering ongoing contact and accompaniment through the distress

Me (Olivia): I guess so.

Questions for discussion

- 1) Can you describe a time when you spoke words that were very different from how you were really feeling? What motivated you to handle it that way?
- 2) Have you been visibly in distress and experienced people responding to you by telling you about *their* distress about *your* issue, while largely disregarding *your* crisis?
- 3) Can you describe a situation in which you were talking to someone who was in the midst of an intensely distressing situation? Try to describe how you were feeling during that interaction.
- 4) How did you interact with the person who was in intense distress? If you could do it over again, what might you do differently?