



# Listening as a caring competency



Effective listening can make you a better nurse.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN** to be fully present when listening to someone or trying to observe his or her behavior? A student asked me that question, saying that listening and observing during an emergency is really tough, especially with all the activity and pressure to perform correctly hitting at once. Quite an insight!

This discussion arose during a simulation related to basic life support (BLS) training. Team A was the action team responding to a medical emergency, and Team B was observing for situational awareness, clinical leadership, and teamwork. This scenario demonstrated that mastering the science of the BLS technique is only one aspect of delivering care. Learning the teamwork skills to accompany it can actually be harder than the resuscitation skills.

Being fully present requires you to set aside your personal priorities to hear not only what the person (or in this case, the team) is saying but also what isn't being said; in other words, the "backstory" or hidden message. The backstory is important because spoken words can be brief or terse, so observing tone of voice and body language can give you a much better impression of the total picture. And it can illustrate whether good teamwork is in place.

Throughout my nursing career, I've seen time and time again that some of the best nurses and nursing leaders are highly effective listeners. Effective listening builds rapport and contributes to the quality of a relationship. Just what are some of the most effective ways to listen?

## Going beyond quiet

Nurses who listen are able to create trustworthy relationships. They're able to have their patients' and the family's best interests at heart, and those of their team members, too. They do that by going beyond just being quiet or giving someone their full attention. They observe body language, facial expressions, mood, and behavior.

**85% of what we know is learned through listening, but most of us listen at only a 25% comprehension rate.**

## Going beyond competency

Listening may not be a competency that appears in your job description, but it's essential to caring. Our connected world has actually disconnected our communication skills, especially listening. Smart phones, video games, and computers can grab our attention more effectively than another human. Learning to listen and observe takes time and practice—and often a good mentor, too, who can give you feedback.

In a flipped classroom, where the students become the teachers, the students in the BLS simulation discussed their ideas about how to become more effective listeners and enhance clinical skills at the same time:

- **Show you care.** View the patient and your team as having unique capabilities you can identify and respect. In the BLS simulation, showing care and concern for family members witnessing resuscitation can go a long way to building trust and compassion.
- **Pay attention to what matters.** Listen to the words and views expressed and try to understand what matters most to the other person.
- **Be calm, not frenetic.** You can better show empathy when you're composed and can hold eye contact. Hurried encounters rob us of time and attention and can end up costing us in the long run when we have to repeat a task we rushed through.
- **Be mindful.** Going beyond the obvious verbal and nonverbal communication cues means observing the environment and what's happening all around the situation.

I'm confident this group of students will remember that their future success may depend on how well they listen and communicate with others. They experienced the reality that being people-oriented builds interpersonal skills, which are just as important as clinical skills. I witnessed the next generation of healers become competent and more confident about the caring process during a BLS simulation that became a listening incubator. A group of students joining forces and pooling knowledge to learn collectively is a powerful example of "all teach, all learn" in action.

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