



MINDFULNESS AND MEDICINE: The Healing Capacity of Genuine Listening

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ARE YOU LISTENING?

You're probably a pretty good listener. One way to assess this is to reflect on how often you interrupt a patient after you have asked, "Tell me what brings you in today?" To be better than average, research on physician communication skills suggests you'd want to let more than 11 seconds pass before interrupting. But if you are genuinely interested in listening to your patient, gathering information, wanting the patient to feel heard, and understanding better why you interrupt in the first place, "mindful listening" may be just what the patient ordered.

This article explores mindful listening, an accessible mindfulness practice that may meaningfully improve your quality of life, personally and professionally. Given the robust treatment of mindfulness in popular culture, you've most likely heard of mindfulness and of the psychological, cognitive and physical benefits associated with engaging in mindfulness practices. You may even have attended a presentation or been guided in a short mindfulness exercise to help manage stress, reduce burnout or be more at ease amid moments of uncertainty. Here, we offer guidance on how to incorporate a practical mindfulness practice into your day. We decided to address mindful listening because it is a useful tool to improve listening and to help deepen the physician-patient relationship, and it serves as an important mindfulness practice unto itself.

MINDFUL LISTENING

The practice of mindful listening invites you to direct your attention inward to the thoughts, feelings and body sensations that arise when you are engaged in conversation, and to become more skillful at attending to them, rather than impulsively reacting by, for example, interrupting. Beneath the surface, our thoughts readily move into past and future—even while talking with someone—and such mental time travel can adversely influence our beliefs, mood and levels of stress, often without our realizing it. »

When listening, attention is usually directed outward. Whether we are aware of it or not, our inner experience often influences our decision-making and conduct, yet we tend not to notice these vital signals or know what to do with them. For example, a patient begins to share his or her fears about a procedure, and we interrupt to reassure them that things will be okay. If we paid closer attention, we might notice the arising of feeling anxious, body sensations of tension in the chest, and thoughts like “they need” to have the procedure or “I don’t have time for this.” But interrupting, no matter how well intended, tends not to be the most effective response. It’s simply the response that is triggered most immediately—and often without our being aware—as a way to quell the agitation we are feeling, be it frustration, anger, worry or even boredom. It is a superpower to be able to truly listen, especially when feeling stressed or when the emotional content of an issue is intense, and still be able to maintain a steady state. Notably, there are certain times when interrupting is appropriate, and it is helpful to be able to discern the difference. Mindful listening facilitates this discernment and establishes a foundation for doing so in a more effective, more empathic, less reactive way.

“DO NOT INTERRUPT”

The following mindful listening exercise can improve your listening skills and, if you pay attention while practicing it, deepen your understanding of mindfulness and help you live a more mindful life. The instruction is to go an entire day without interrupting anyone, be it a colleague, family member or patient. While you likely will find it extremely challenging, it is the very moments of challenge from which you can learn the most. When you catch yourself about to interrupt, turn your attention inward and, rather than interrupt, “observe” your thoughts, feelings and body sensations. This can feel uncomfortable, and you may find it helpful to steady yourself with a few slower, deeper breaths. It is likely that, at first, you will not be able to go a whole day. But as you develop your ability to catch yourself about to interrupt and, informed by that moment of awareness, observe the agitation that is crying out for you to interrupt, you will become better equipped to sustain your attention and engagement, and genuinely listen. Importantly, try not to “white knuckle” it, meaning that the instruction is not to clench your teeth and fight the urge to interrupt until you detect an opening to jump in. Rather, it is an open invitation to practice patience, to genuinely listen, to gather more data, and to demonstrate a show of respect for another human being, as well as yourself. As Sir William Osler reminds us, “Just listen to your patient; she is telling you the diagnosis.”

ARE YOU STILL LISTENING?

As mindfulness carves a deeper niche into medicine, more will be learned about its benefits and the various ways it can be practiced. We believe that mindful listening is a powerful mindfulness practice, often confused with the admonition to “listen” and “pay attention,” skills that are assumed but rarely taught. We hope you find the “Do Not Interrupt” practice helpful for becoming a more effective listener, while at the same time offering you insight into why you may interrupt in the first place. Many articles on mindfulness address the importance of establishing a daily mindfulness practice, which can consist of



Photo Top: Scott Rogers and his father, ACG Past President Dr. Arvey Rogers. Photo courtesy of Dr. Rogers.

sitting for five to 30 minutes, resting attention on the breath, and when mind wandering is detected, returning attention to the breath. We strongly advocate this practice, which in many ways is a form of mindful listening. For if you pay close attention, you will “listen” to yourself and, as you do, you will be less likely to interrupt what may be the most interesting and important thing you have to say.

RESOURCES

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