

Listening Skills - Lessons to Learn

1. Start from a place of openness.
 - Try to understand the other person's point of view.
 - Let go of preconceived ideas. Consciously reject stereotypes.
 - Defer judgment.
 - Judging is when you have stopped listening to the other person because you have already made assumptions about the other person.
 - Focus on what is being said before style of delivery, and allow for different ways of speaking.
2. Pay attention.
 - Practice blocking out distractions.
 - Listen to the other's person's body language - be aware of verbal and non-verbal messages.
 - Allow the speaker to finish each thought before speaking yourself. Don't interrupt.
 - Ask questions.
3. Sympathize, but balance concern with realism.
 - Focus on presence, not taking action based on discussion - just be there.
 - Treat the person the way you think you'd want to be treated.
 - Reflect back what you're hearing.
 - Just communicating that you are listening and you care can go a long way.
 - Be aware of and avoid fostering unrealistic hopes or making promises that might be difficult to keep.
4. Be patient and friendly.
 - Find out about your friend's interests - ask about sports, hobbies, or current events. Talk about topics that evoke positive feelings for the detained person.
 - Be aware that family may not be a safe topic for everyone.
 - Sometimes it takes time to turn thoughts and feelings into words: when there are pauses, let the speaker continue in his or her own time.
 - If you find yourself responding emotionally to someone, take a step back and ask for more information: "I may not be understanding you correctly. What I thought you just said is XXX; is that what you meant?"
5. Show that you're listening and provide feedback.
 - Use body language and gestures to convey your attention - nod, smile.

- Encourage your friend to continue with short verbal comments - yes, uh huh, etc.
6. Anticipate the unique challenges of detention visitation.
 - You will almost certainly be meeting in a typical jail/prison visiting room, separated by a physical barrier and perhaps talking on phones, or even by video link in some facilities. The setting will not be natural or comfortable.
 - Cultural differences can create misunderstandings and misinterpretations. What are some potential pitfalls that you know of? What habits or ways of communicating from around the world differ from American culture?
 7. Apply these lessons to handle uncomfortable conversations.
 - Instead of feeling like you need to fix problems or complaints or fears, reflect back what you're hearing in neutral way - "Sounds like you really miss your kids."
 - Allow for some silence - allow your friend space to say what's on his or her mind. Let your friend guide by asking questions like, "Do you want to tell me about it? How are you feeling right now?"
 - Just be present and express your concern and sympathy.
 - If asked for assistance you can't provide, offer a reference to the right organization or individual, or cite DVN policy as the reason you can't help, though you wish you could do more (in a general sense).
 - In the face of persistence, tell your friend that if s/he would like to talk further, s/he can arrange for a visit with a DVN captain/leader.