

Tips for Active Listening

Active listening is one of the most important skills we use as advocates. We know how to navigate multiple systems, put together a support group with no budget, and to build relationships with community partners. The most important skill we have though, and the one we use with every survivor, is active listening. We may be the only person in a survivor's life that they can speak to about their experiences of sexual violence, work through issues related to the abuse, and share ways that systems of oppression have impacted their experiences. When we actively listen to survivors we show compassion and support. This is the heart of advocacy and it won't ever steer you wrong.

Becoming a good active listener takes practice and patience. It can be difficult to turn off the part of our brain that is thinking of the next thing to say or trying to remember what resource would be best. To be truly in the moment and able to hear the words as they come is not easy or effortless for any advocate. But in time, all advocates can develop this skill.

Active listening is a way to build connection with survivors and to show concern for their experiences and emotions. This skill can be used in every situation with survivors including one-on-one, group settings, over the phone, and in person. The goal of active listening is to show the survivor that you are listening and accepting what they are sharing and to encourage the survivor to speak as freely as possible about issues or topics that may be difficult to speak about including sexual violence and the lived experiences of oppression.

Often when we think we are actively listening what we are actually doing is thinking of what to say next or listening with a specific goal in mind. This is an understandable response as it often comes from a place of wanting to help the person in front of us. However when we aren't actively listening we

miss important opportunities to build trust and work collaboratively with the survivor.

Prior to meeting with a survivor or the start of your shift answering the crisis and support line take a few moments to center yourself. This opportunity to ground yourself in the moment and your advocacy practice will help you be fully present while you listen.

During the conversation there may be moments when the survivor is silent. Resist the urge to fill this silence with questions and comments. For some advocates being comfortable with silence is the most difficult part of active listening. In our everyday interactions we often find silence uncomfortable and seek to fill these quiet moments. In our advocacy practice silence can be a powerful tool. Silence is an opportunity for the survivor to gather their thoughts and try to articulate what they want to communicate. Allowing survivors the time and space to find the right words for themselves builds trust and puts control back in their hands.

There are four main skills involved in active listening: ***Reflecting***, ***Encouraging***, ***Summarizing***, and ***Exploring***. Below we provide information about each skill along with examples. We encourage you to incorporate these skills in to your work, while continuing to honor the individual needs of the survivor in front of you.

Reflecting

Reflecting is the skill of conveying your attention through non-verbal cues. Non-verbal cues are a visual way of showing that you are paying attention and actively listening. Non-verbal cues are a great place to start practicing because survivors are paying attention to these cues whether they know it or not. If you can't visually show your attention then encouraging, summarizing, and exploring won't work.



Whether over the phone or in person, you should not interrupt the survivor. This signals to the survivor that your contributions to the conversation are more important than theirs. Questions, comments, and minimal encouragers can always wait until the survivor has had the opportunity to convey the entirety of what they want to say.

For in-person advocacy, non-verbal cues may include making eye contact, nodding your head, and maintaining a posture which focuses energy towards the survivor. It is also important to not show signs of distraction like fidgeting, checking your phone, or watching the clock. Every survivor responds to non-verbal cues differently so be sure to pay attention to what the survivor responds to. Be aware of the cultural values of different forms of communications.

For advocacy over the phone, try making very brief statements or contributing minimal encouragers to show that you have noted what the survivor has said. A brief statement could include, “sounds difficult” or “yes, absolutely”. Minimal encouragers could include, “mm-hmm” or “uh-huh”. These are subtle ways you let the survivor know you’re still there, even though they can’t see you.

Reflecting also involves observing the verbal and non-verbal cues of the survivor. Notice what thoughts, feelings, and needs have been expressed and not expressed. Observe the survivor’s body language and tone of voice. Are they mumbling? Are they hunched over? Have they stopped making eye contact? Is their voice cracking? Use these observations to inform the conversation as you move forward.

Encouraging

Encouraging communicates to the survivor that what is being expressed is important to you and you want to hear more. Often this is a one-sentence statement or an action which prompts the survivor to continue sharing their thoughts, hopes, or needs.

Usually *Encouraging* occurs during a lull or interval when the survivor may be observing and deciding if you're really interested in hearing more information. *Encouraging* gently urges the survivor to tell you more about the topic and shows that you are not going to shy away from anything they share about their experiences of sexual violence and lived oppression.

For in-person advocacy, encouragement can look like a smile, raising your eyebrows, turning your head slightly, or shaking your head up and down. Sometimes silence itself can be the encouragement. By not jumping in to make our own statement we show the survivor that we want them to continue speaking.

For over the phone advocacy, try some of the statements below.

- "I'd like to hear more about what you want."
- "If you feel safe, you can share more about..."
- "I'd like to hear more about how you feel."

Reflecting and *Encouraging* are crucial to active listening. Many conversations you have with survivors will only involve those two skills. Only when you feel like you have adequately reflected and encouraged should you move forward with *summarizing* and *exploring*. No matter where the conversation moves, you can always return to *reflecting* and *encouraging*.

Summarizing

Summarizing your understanding of what the survivor has shared assists our comprehension of the situation and shows our concern. As a result of generational or immediate trauma, survivors often do not have a linear way of sharing their experiences. Regardless of trauma, when people are nervous or excited they jump around in the conversation and it can be difficult to understand. *Summarizing* helps us have a mutual understanding of what has been shared even when our cultural experiences might be very different.



Taking the time to summarize what you understood and clarify with the survivor show that we care about understanding the situation and getting the information right. This helps us build trust in the conversation and encourages the survivor to share more.

When *summarizing*, always ask for feedback. In paraphrasing what the survivor has shared, we don't always get all the information right. We might not have picked up on the tone of voice or word choice that was meant to convey anger, sadness, or joy. Survivors won't always feel comfortable telling you that you misunderstood something so it is always best to preemptively ask.

Examples of summarizing statements:

- "It's important for me to fully understand what you just said. I heard you say..."
- "Let me see if I understand you correctly and please correct me if I'm off. You believe ..."
- "Let me know if this fits with what you were saying... it sounds like..."

Examples of asking for feedback:

- "...did I get that right?"
- "...please tell me if I missed something."
- "...did I hear what you were trying to say?"

Exploring

Exploring the topic is the last skill and one that you won't use in every interaction. *Exploring* is when we ask clarifying and relevant questions to the survivor to help them work through the topic we are discussing. Not every survivor is ready for this step so always be open to just allowing the survivor to share their thoughts and not doing anything else.

Asking open-ended questions helps us understand the problem more thoroughly and helps the survivor flesh out their feelings. Being heard and having a voice is vital to moving through an issue and healing. *Exploring* is a safe way for survivors to work through all sides of a topic and feel heard.

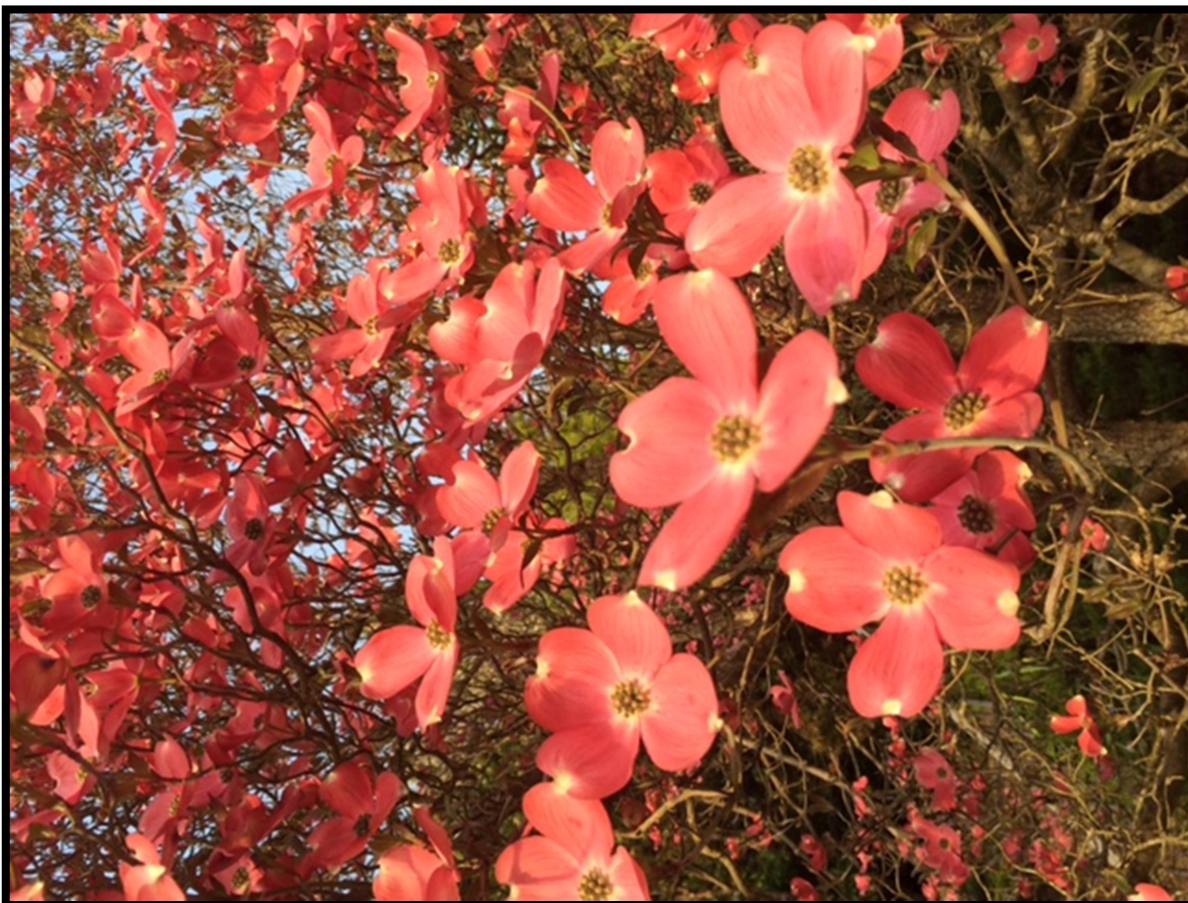
Examples of open-ended questions:

- “How did you come to that conclusion?”
- “When he said that, how did it make you feel?”
- “What outcome are you hoping for?”

Be careful not to investigate the topic or ask questions simply out of curiosity. Your questions should always serve the survivor’s best interests. Let the survivor steer the direction of the conversation and allow them to set the pace. You can always return to reflecting and encouraging.

Active listening is a skill that you can hone with practice and attention. When you prioritize this skill in your advocacy practice, you will see that every service you provide will get better. Focusing on listening first makes our relationships with survivors stronger and we are more equipped to serve them. Inviting survivors to share experiences of sexual violence and lived oppression helps disrupt our cultural narrative of what is okay to talk about and how we seek support. Sexual assault survivors need to be heard, and we are here to listen.





This tip sheet was prepared by Leah Green, RSP Rural TA Specialist, with input from many Rural Grantees. For more information, contact leah@iowacasa.org or visit www.resource-sharing-project.org/rural-training-and-technical-assistance.

Please note that this publication uses *they/them/theirs* in the singular to recognize there are more than two genders and affirm survivors who are transgender or who identify outside the gender binary.

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