MODULE

10

ACTIVE LISTENING

When we understand active listening as one, if not the most, essential component of our work, we are better able to meet survivors where they're at and allow them to guide us to what they need. This section will explore the importance of active listening as well as characteristics and skills that support active listening in advocacy work. It will also address the importance of using organizational and self-care practices amidst emotionally taxing work.

LESSON 1: **Lecture and brainstorming**

LESSON 2: **Active listening skill descriptions and partner activity**

LESSON 3: **Skill review worksheet**

LESSON 4: **Practicing self-care discussion**

OBJECTIVES

Participants will be able to:

- Discuss the centrality of active listening to advocacy work.
- Name two characteristics to active listening.
- Describe two skills that support active listening.

MATERIALS

- ☐ Training agenda (if you create one)
- ☐ Flipchart paper or dry erase board and markers
- ☐ Pens/pencils and paper for each trainee
- ☐ Copies of Active Listening Skills Matching Worksheet (included in module)
- ☐ Copies of Active Listening Skills Handout (included in module)
- ☐ Computer with screen, projector, internet, and audio (optional)

TIPS FOR PREPARATION

- Print handouts listed in the Materials section of this module and make copies for participants.
- Review articles, materials, and lessons to be comfortable with the material before the training session.
- "Listen Up!," a comprehensive and complementary eLearning course on active listening is available free for public use. This course, designed for advocates, informs the contents of this module. Trainers may consider asking participants to complete the eLearning course as part of the foundational training and discuss what was learned in a follow up session. Trainers should complete the course too. We recommend allotting one hour for the course.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- **Active listening is central to the work of advocacy.**

  It is how we make the core principles of advocacy come to life, and is perhaps the greatest skill we can offer in advocacy work.

- **Active listening prioritizes being with the survivor here and now.**

  Active listening encourages us to put a pause on any desire to jump in and "fix" or offer advice. Simply listening is a valuable service on its own. When we prioritize active listening, we recognize that it is a powerful tool that enables survivors to experience connection and be heard. Through active listening, we can also learn about additional needs survivors have, without asking invasive questions.

- **We value emotional and connection-focused needs through active listening.**

  For some of us who may be solution-oriented or outcome driven, active listening may be a skill that invites us to stretch beyond our traditional ways of doing things and value helping in ways that might be less tangible than ways we are accustomed. Think: it's not always about "doing," sometimes it is about being present, listening, and caring.

- **We build trust, rapport, and safety with active listening.**

  Strong advocates value survivor-centered approaches, and this means practicing flexibility to provide attention and care that best suits each person we work with. We build trust and rapport with survivors through active listening. Core to an advocate's work is listening, noticing verbal and non-verbal cues, and to responding in ways that reflect how the survivor defines their needs. There is no standard approach. Active listening requires being present and taking cues from the person you're working with about what they need.

LESSON 1: ACTIVE LISTENING LECTURE AND BRAINSTORM

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Begin this section by reviewing the role of an advocate. As a large group, ask participants to respond to two questions:

- ***What is an advocate?***
- ***What is an advocate not?***

Responses might include:

- ***An advocate is:***
  - Supportive, a good listener, a sounding board, someone who can help outline options, a connector or liaison with other resources, creative, a co-strategist, non-judgmental, compassionate, someone who can research and share information, an activist, survivor-centered

- ***An advocate is not:***
  - An advice giver, an investigator, judge or jury, rigid, the decision-maker, the expert, or a savior

As you summarize the responses of participants, emphasize the descriptors of an advocate that are rooted in an advocate's role of active listening. For example, all of the descriptor examples above rely on an advocate using active listening to be able to hear where a survivor is at and provide thoughtful support to meet a survivor's needs.

Start exploring what is meant by "active listening" by using the Points for Consideration section, above, to offer context for this topic. ***Then, ask participants as a large group to reflect on what pops into mind when they think of "active listening."***

Possible responses might include:

- Listening intently
- Paying attention to what someone is saying
- Not talking over the person who is talking
- Listening to understand

- Offering cues that one is paying attention
- Supporting someone through listening
- Listening to truly hear what someone is saying, not listening with focus on response
- Not thinking about what you might want to say next

Define active listening for participants.

Active Listening is a combination of skills that we use intentionally to create a safe space for someone to share. A safe space means providing an unconditional and nonjudgmental environment where survivors can express their thoughts and feelings, examine and evaluate their options, and determine their own right solutions. This space is created through actively listening, affirming the survivor's strength, and creating an environment in which the survivor leads their own healing journey.

LESSON 2: ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

WORKSHEET & PARTNER ACTIVITY

Using the "Active Listening Skills" handout included in the module, review the different active listening skills as a large group. You may opt to have participants take turns reading the descriptions. Be sure to leave time for questions.

After the group has finished reviewing the handout, invite participants to get in pairs to practice and reflect on their own active listening skills. Have participants take turns each sharing a story from something that happened this past week; it does not need to be a private or emotional story. One person will share for a few minutes and the other person will practice active listening. Then pairs should swap roles. After practice, pairs should discuss how they feel about their own skills.

Ask them to reflect on:

- How easy or difficult might it be to practice active listening?
- What active listening skills do I practice well?
- What active listening skills do I need to strengthen?

After pairs have had a chance to discuss, invite them to share with the larger group any critical reflections they noted. Reassure participants that active listening is a muscle that we continue to strengthen the more we practice it; some skills may come naturally while others we must practice.

LESSON 3: SKILL REVIEW WORKSHEET

Using the “Active Listening Skills Matching” worksheet included in the module, ask participants to complete the worksheet on their own, matching each skill of active listening with the best descriptor. This worksheet will summarize and test knowledge learned from Lesson 2. Review the worksheet as a group, using the key provided. The worksheet should take less than ten minutes to complete. Debrief the worksheet with participants. Remind participants that there is often overlap between active listening skills and that during any given conversation with a survivor, whether in person or via phone, we are likely to use many skills. In fact, skills are often strengthened when used together. Allow for any remaining questions related to active listening.

LESSON 4: PRACTICING SELF-CARE

DISCUSSION

Prior to completing this module, it is important to remind participants of the need to practice self-care and use organizational supports for wellbeing amidst this often emotionally difficult work. When we are helping those who have been victimized and hear traumatic experiences, we might become weary or emotionally changed from the weight of the work. Vicarious trauma, burnout, and stress may occur as a result. The very nature of anti-violence work is physically and emotionally taxing and being affected by this work is normal. How we manage our responses to trauma can either help or hinder our ability to continue to do this work. Using organizational supports (paid time off, debriefing, coaching, and supervision) and individual practices for self-care (time with family and friends, journaling, dancing, mindfulness practices) can help avoid burnout or compassion fatigue which can be evidenced by chronic fatigue, insomnia, physical symptoms such as chest pain or stomach issues, anxiety and much more. By learning how to recognize when the work is affecting us in a negative way (or signs that it is about to), we can learn how to manage stress, overwhelming feelings, and ground ourselves in healthy ways using methods that fit within our own cultural practices and lifestyles. This learning of how to take care of ourselves doing this work is called self-care.

As a large group, invite participants to reflect on practices they might use to support their own wellbeing amidst this emotionally taxing work. Ask participants to also reflect on what they can offer to each other to support collective wellbeing.

ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is when we attempt to reflect back what the survivor has said in a shortened form. It allows the survivor to know that we have heard them. It can also highlight what has been said.

Examples of paraphrasing are: "What I think I heard you say was…" or "It sounds like…"

Encouragers

This skill helps to acknowledge that a survivor has been heard and can validate thoughts and feelings as the survivor is sharing. Encouragers tend to be natural responses that we use in many conversations. They include nonverbal minimal responses, such as a head nod or positive facial expression. Encouragers also include using minimal verbal responses such as "mm hmm" or "please, go on." These are used to encourage the survivor to keep talking and acknowledge that they have been heard. On phone calls, encouragers reassure the caller that we are still present and listening.

Validation

Validation can be used in any conversation to help someone feel more confident in what they are feeling or what they are saying. Validation does not mean agreeing with someone, rather acknowledging that they've been heard. While it isn't an advocate's job to say what's "valid" or "invalid," gentle reminders that whatever one is feeling is okay can be helpful.

An example of validation is, "I hear you; this is all very overwhelming."

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions support open sharing and dialogue. These questions do not require a "yes" or "no" answer, but rather, they invite the survivor to use their own words and share to the extent of their comfort.

Examples of open-ended question are, "What was it like after you spoke with your friend?" or "How would you like to follow up about connecting at a future time?"

Examples of close-ended questions are: "Did that make you upset?" or "Do you still talk with them?"

Probing Questions

Probing questions are a type of open-ended question that are used to encourage the survivor to share meaningful information or think deeper about something for the benefit of the survivor. For example, the advocate might ask, "What do you think would happen if…?"

It is also important to be aware that the way in which we ask a question may come across to a survivor as placing blame. Often "why" questions come across as assigning blame or judgment. For example, "Why don't you want to talk to a therapist?" may sound judgmental. Instead we can ask "how" questions to get to underlying feelings and thoughts. For example, "How are you feeling about counseling?"

Reflecting

This is the skill of listening and offering back what the survivor has shared. Similar to paraphrasing, it allows us to highlight emotions that have been expressed and communicates to the survivor that they have been heard. Reflecting tends to go beyond paraphrasing by also including any insight or reflections an advocate may be able to offer to benefit the survivor. Reflecting can include offering reflections of a wide variety, such as pointing out a survivor's strengths based on something they've shared or noting perceived incongruences between what a survivor says and how they appear.

Examples of reflecting are: "You sound really happy!" or "I hear you saying that you're not angry, but your tone leads me think you might be."

Clarifying and Checking In

This skill can be used when you are unsure what the survivor has said or what they mean. Checking in, with minimal interrupting, is likely to lead to less confusion later in the conversation. This skill can also be used to focus in on something the survivor said that you didn't get a chance to address initially.

Advocates can and should admit that when confused or having difficulty understanding.

An example of clarifying and checking in is: "I just want to make sure I understand you correctly…" or "I think I heard…is that right or did I get it wrong?"

Summarizing

This skill is used at the end of a conversation to sum up thoughts, feelings, or a plan. This skill can be used in tandem with paraphrasing and clarifying, for example, if a survivor has been talking for a while and you want to ensure you are clear on what has been said.

An example of summarizing is – "It sounds like today has been overwhelming and trying to make a decision today feels stressful. Based on what you've shared, I wonder if it might be helpful to spend a few days to think about how you'd like to proceed."

Reframing

This skill is used to offer a new perspective to a situation. It is never intended to invalidate a survivor's perspective, but rather offers additional ways to think about something.

An example could sound like "I hear you saying that what happens feels like it was your fault. It sounds to me like this was outside of your control and nothing you could have done would have made this your fault."

Silence

Allowing space for silence is important in advocacy. Survivors and advocates alike can benefit from quiet that allows time to pause, think, and reflect. After a few minutes of silence, we might say 'take your time' to let the survivor know we are still with them.

It can be helpful to consider reasons a survivor could become silent:

- They could be trying to gain composure after sharing a deep detail, memory, or feelings that make them feel vulnerable
- They could be having strong emotions related to something that has been discussed in the meeting
- They may disagree with something you've said and are trying to decide how to respond
- They could be digesting the time they have spent with you or the memories about what has happened
- They could be trying to find words
- They could be thinking about how to end the conversation
- They could be losing track of where they are at because they are having difficulty staying connected to the here and now
- Their energy level may have waned

- Thy could be waiting to see what you are going to do next because they are used to people not believing them or judging them
- Depending on culture, they may have notions about perceived authority of advocates or other helping professionals and may expect directive support, whereas their role is less active

Normalizing

This skill is used to let the person you're speaking with know that what they are feeling is common or "normal" and that they aren't "bad," "wrong," or alone in feeling this way.

An example of normalizing is: "I hear you when you say you feel embarrassed for feeling scared all of the time. I also want you to know that fear is a really common response that can stick around for a while after a traumatic experience. It isn't anything you need to feel embarrassed about, but I understand how overwhelming and confusing these feelings might be."

Closing

The skill and practice of closing may include summarizing and checking in. Jointly the advocate and survivor can recap important parts of the meeting and clarify next steps. It is important to provide survivors with information about what they can expect next, as well as resources in the event they need anything before you meet again.

An example of closing is: "We have about ten minutes left in our time together today. Would it be okay if we checked in about next steps, as well as any remaining questions you might have that we should connect about today?" Assuming the survivor says "Yes" an advocate can respond to any questions a survivor has, recap any highlights from the conversation, make space for the survivor to offer thoughts or reflection, confirm dates and times for any future meetings, and reiterate any resource or referral information.

Breathing

This skill is a way of becoming mindful of the moment we're in. Breathing helps us become more fully embodied and has the power to help regulate stress responses. Breathing practices can help survivors slow down and stay present in the moment. Similarly, advocates can model breathing techniques that also help regulate their own stress. It can be helpful to work with the survivor on breathing practices they can use on their own, or you can use together, to calm the nervous system and become grounded. If breathing exercises are not something you're familiar with as an advocate, it could be beneficial to do some basic reading on mindfulness techniques or simple breathing exercises.

ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS: MATCHING WORKSHEET

Instructions: Match each skill of active listening from top box with the best descriptor in bottom box.

ACTIVE LISTENING SKILL

Breathing
Clarifying and Checking In
Closing
Encouragers
Open-ended questions
Normalizing
Paraphrasing
Probing Questions
Reflecting
Reframing
Silence
Summarizing
Validation

DESCRIPTOR

- when we attempt to reflect back what the survivor has said in a shortened form, allows the survivor to know that we have heard the, also highlights what has been said
- helps to acknowledge that a survivor has been heard, tend to be natural responses that we use in many conversations, are used to encourage the survivor to keep talking and acknowledge that they have been heard
- can be used in any conversation to help someone feel more confident in what they are feeling or what they are saying, does not mean agreeing with someone rather acknowledging that they've been heard
- support open sharing and dialogue, invites the survivor to use their own words and share to the extent of their comfort
- are used to encourage the survivor to share meaningful information or think deeper about something for the benefit of the survivor
- listening and offering back what the survivor has shared, it allows us to highlight emotions that have been expressed and communicates to the survivor that they have been heard, can include pointing out a survivor's strengths based on something they've shared or noting perceived incongruences between what a survivor says and how they appear
- can be used when you are unsure what the survivor has said or what they mean, can lead to less confusion later in the conversation, can also be used to focus in on something the survivor said that you didn't get a chance to address initially
- is used at the end of a conversation to sum up thoughts, feelings, or a plan
- is used to offer a new perspective to a situation, it is never intended to invalidate a survivor's perspective, but rather offers additional ways to think about something
- survivors and advocates alike can benefit from quiet that allows time to pause, think, and reflect
- is used to let the person you're speaking with know that what they are feeling is common or "normal" and that they aren't "bad," "wrong," or alone in feeling this way
- jointly the advocate and survivor can recap important parts of the meeting and clarify next steps
- helps us become more fully embodied and has the power to help regulate stress responses, can help survivors slow down and stay present in the moment, advocates can model this skill also help regulate their own stress