

Sue often felt frustrated when listening to her brother John on the phone. She knew he was under pressure at work but found it hard to talk about it. She felt rather helpless, but unbeknown to her, John took great comfort from their chats on the phone.

Listening may not always feel "active" or "practical" enough, but it is one of the most precious and healing gifts you can offer anyone.

From a Christian Perspective – Listening to God for our family

Families have always played an important part in the Bible. Indeed God sent his only Son to be part of a family. God cares about each member of our family, whether or not they acknowledge Him.

You might find it helpful to put aside some time to be still with God and listen to Him for your family. Consider each member in turn, holding them into God's love. Listen to God for each one: How does He see them? What is He saying about the relationships in our family? Does He want to bring healing to our family? How might He be calling me to respond?

God invites us also to be honest with him about our true feelings, so that he can shine His light into those difficult areas, Ask for His help in dealing with them sensitively and appropriately.

God also invites us to listen attentively and non judgmentally to our family and in so doing we are showing them something of God's unconditional love.

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Listening to my Family

Who is my family?

Just as each person is unique, so each family is unique. Consider your own family: is it large or small? Does it include step-family? Has it been affected by separation or divorce? Do you live with or near each other or are you scattered far and wide? How much time do you spend together? What is communication like in your family? How free is it? All these factors can affect the way we listen in our families. It is good though when the family can be a place of mutual care and support for each other.

One important way to begin to give and receive that care and support is through listening.

Listening at home

Sometimes it seems much easier to listen to people at work or in the church than it does to listen to our immediate family at home. It can seem as if we bring out the worst (and the best!) in each other when we live together.

Or perhaps we are most fully ourselves at home with our family. Either way, it often seems that as the stresses of life crowd in, we cry out for our own needs to be met, leaving very little space to listen to others.

So how can we listen to each other better?

Try to see others each as a unique individual. Consider what the stresses in their lives may be and imagine how you might feel in their shoes.

Try to discern what their needs may be at the moment: rest, emotional support, fun, security? For a few minutes each day try to put aside your own agenda and listen wholeheartedly to them.

Show them you are listening by letting them tell their story in their own way. Avoid interruptions, comments, jumping in with advice, however tempting it might be! It is important to respect their opinion even if yours is different.

Listen to more than just their words: be aware of how they express themselves, e.g. facial expression, tone of voice, silences. What feelings are they expressing?

Remember – you don't need a lot of time in order to listen well to someone. A few minutes of undivided attention may be of more value than an hour of mind-wandering and distracted "listening".

Listen to your own feelings

Sometimes our own feelings get in the way and prevent us listening to others. Take the time to listen to yourself:

- How do I feel in relation to my family?
- Am I angry with anyone?
- Am I harbouring grudges
- Are there negative undercurrents needing to be brought into the open?
- Are there any unresolved hurts or areas of tension?
- Am I being open and honest in my communication?

Pat found it particularly difficult to listen to her mother without feeling criticised. She always ended up feeling like a little girl again, despite being in her mid 40s.

Listening at a distance

It may be that you don't live with any members of your family. Perhaps you meet up regularly or occasionally, or maybe your only communication is by phone or letter.

The same principles still apply. When you do have contact, try to listen to more than just their words. What feelings are they expressing? What are they *not* saying?

When contact is less frequent it is important to try and find even a little quality time to share at a deeper level. By acknowledging what they say and feel without jumping in to advise or comment you will make them feel understood and cared for.