

Ep #44: Listening



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Susi Hately

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hately. You will hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

With this episode I want to dig into the act of listening, really the art of listening. Listening is such a powerful, powerful tool. And in many ways, it's so simple. And yet it's something that I think a lot of people in the yoga and in the healthcare world overdo and we lose the juice of it in the attempt to get it right.

A few weeks ago I led an incredible, probably the very best therapeutic yoga intensive I have ever led. And inside of that intensive there were some really profound experiences in the listening exercise that I run inside of the intensive.

Now this is not a new exercise, I've done this over a period of time. But the way that the community of people were in the program and then how they then kind of took in this part of the week really shifted a lot of people and the way a lot of people looked at healing relationships and what they were going to go do next when they went back to their practices.

So here's how the exercise goes. I call it listening to the story and it's my take on taking a history with a twist. We simply do this, there's a person in a pair that's a client and a person that's the teacher, and it's role playing. The person who's the client fills in a body diagram with all the areas of their body that are sore, or tight, or things they want to work on. It's like a pretend consult.

And then they set whether it's, in this case it was over Zoom, which made that experience even more powerful to show how powerful you could do listening on an online platform. But the client would sit there and talk for five minutes about the story of what was on their body diagram. The job of the teacher was to simply listen.

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Now I added in a few things just to sweeten this process. And they were as follows. The teacher was not permitted to ask clarifying questions. They weren't permitted to interrupt, or nod their head, or say uh-huh, or any other type of thing that they might do behaviorally to insinuate that they were listening. They simply had to listen. This is really powerful.

What ended up happening is that a lot of people who had been trained in listening had some really like blow their mind moments. Like love bomb blow up moments of challenging them in a way that was profoundly impactful for their soul. In that they were trained that they needed to have their client feel validated.

And in not nodding, in not asking clarifying questions, in not saying, “What I hear you saying is this...” By not doing any of that stuff they were left with this like, how do I know the person knows? How do you know that the client knows that they're being listened to if I can't do any of that stuff?

And there was a moment of like, “How do I know I'm doing this right?” Which where I hearken back at the beginning of the episode where I said, “So many people make listening an overdone process.” How I responded to that question was this, I shared a story of the first time I went to a meditation retreat.

The meditation retreat was based on a dyad format and I believe it was either four or five days. And over the course of this four or five days we ran 13 sessions per day in dyads. Where there was a partnership and one person said to the other, “Tell me who you are.” The person would sit quietly, and then they would respond with whatever came up.

And then the partnership would switch on one condition, that the person who is expressing what they said felt heard, felt listened to, felt like what they were saying was received. Here's the thing, the person who was on the listening side, the one who asked the question, they were not permitted to ask any clarifying questions. They weren't permitted to nod their head.

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They weren't permitted to say all those other things that I was just talking about.

Here's what's really interesting. In order for the partnership, the dyad to switch, the person who had just shared what they were sharing had to feel like what they said was received. And those words are really important because often when we hear received, particularly in a healing relationship, often the assumption is that the other person has taken on their words or their experience. And that's not at all what was happening.

There was this receiving in the space. It wasn't that the other person was receiving, it was like the space, the energy, the universe in a sense, was receiving those words, that experience. Here's what was really cool, in those 13 sessions per day of this back and forth, there were things I heard that were very difficult for me to hear. There were things I heard that were very neutral. There were things that I heard that were very easy.

But over the course of the day, over the course of the days, I got cleaner and clearer in my own state of presence, in my own state of being. It was like clearing off my lens, but really it was clearing off my hearing, of all my ways that I was hearing. And I could simply just be. And soon, many of those things that I might have named as being hard to listen to weren't hard to listen to. There wasn't this trajectory.

Or if they were hard to listen to my response to hearing the experience was just a response that kind of moved through me. I didn't get rigid around it, I stopped kind of doing some things I might do to buffer the experience of feeling something that was negative, or to indulge in one of the experiences that may have been really positive or joyful to listen to. I just got more present.

Then when I took that idea into my teaching, I saw the power of this. That to be in the space of someone who's purely, purely listening is a really powerful experience. And we've all been in those spaces. We've all been around those people who are simply listening.

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What I would often say to people who ask me, “Well, how do you know that the other person feels validated, feels heard?” And my response is often some form of, if you are doing all of those things in order to have them heard, are you actually listening? Like really ask that question to yourself. Are those just to-do items to say, “Yes, I have listened to them.” And then they check off the experience of, “Yes, I feel listened to.”

But there's something different and even deeper, I would say, of when we're just in that space together, and one person is listening to the other without all this other like, “Okay, what's the diagnosis? What are the barriers to recovery?” Or “I hear that what you were saying is this.”

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking the I need to go find the diagnosis. I'm not knocking finding the barriers of recovery. What I am asking a question about is, are you following those processes as a checklist? Are you filling your brain, are you filling your state of being as an in order to?

Because if there's something that I've learned over the almost three decades of working with clients, is that when I'm in an in order to frame or state of being, I'm not listening. And I'm certainly not going to help them as well as I can when I'm simply just there.

I'm going to say something here based off a Rumi poem that might sound almost kind of odd that I'm bringing a Rumi poem into this, but it's important. Rumi has a poem about love which is, “Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.” Now, I may have said that really fast so let me say that again. “Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”

The reason that is so powerful, is because listening is similar. Let's just take that Rumi quote and throw the word listening in for love. Your task is not to seek to listen, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it. Okay, let's just say that one more

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time, your task is not to seek to listen, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

See how powerful that is? Like if you were just in that space, it brings to mind the vulnerability work that Brené Brown is known for. Now I haven't read all of her work, I've just sort of scanned around it, and seen different things online, and heard people talk about what she says, but I haven't read any of her books as of yet.

But what I do know about vulnerability, is tied very closely to vulnerability is curiosity. And tied to curiosity is presence and consciousness. And when two people can be in that space, I think we find the true seeds, the true nourishment for a healing relationship that is based in a state of power with, not power over. Which we typically find in a lot of authority-based types of relationships that are often the case in the medical field.

Whereas when we can be in that place where the teacher or the health practitioner is coming in from this place of vulnerability of listening two humans can meet. One human who has had a lifetime of experience in their body, and what has worked what hasn't worked. And a health professional who brings in their experience, their knowledge base. And when those two come together at an equal level, amazing, amazing solutions can be found.

But when we're listening for the diagnosis, when we're listening for the barriers of recovery, when we're listening for, "Okay, I better make sure that this person feels validated and listened to." There's a ton that is missed. There is a ton around personality, around character, of all the things that have worked and not worked that coalesce into this, I'm going to mix my metaphors here, but coalesce into this amazing web.

And when we have that context of that web, it's almost like a beautiful Mandala. It's remarkable then where we can work from, right? It becomes less about working at a superficial level, and I'm not using the word superficial at all in a negative way. I'm meaning more at like a top surface

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level. Obviously, we're going to still work with someone to help them reduce their symptoms, and carry on, and all that. But we're now coming at all of that top level work from this deep-rooted space.

So here's what I ask you, can you think of a time when you could distinguish between being truly present, and you know, dare I say, and I say it with a bit of hesitation, feigned presence? And yes, being present there is a dose of vulnerability to it. But like I said, when you can come into that space, when you can tiptoe your way into that space, something really, really magical happens.

And the way that you hone your craft, the way that you hone your skill, there's a real beauty in it. There's a real art form to it. There's a real brilliance, dare I say, a genius that really starts to arise.

I had a trainee recently say this to me, she said, "Susi, your clarity of presence and expression is remarkable. You live what you teach in a way that is both unusual and powerfully effective. You are perhaps the best listener I have ever met. And also the most gifted questioner."

I will say that a big reason for how I have developed that is because I don't use a technique to listen. I simply listen. And I also take time to consistently and consciously clear out the clutter in my brain, while also tending to the roots beneath the surface of my being.

I'm not here on this planet by some random act, I'm not here taking up square footage. I'm here on purpose, and I so value the human connections that I have in my world and in my life, that I want to show up for each one, with care, with as much consciousness as I can have in that moment. And that is what opens the door to listening. Listening with all of myself and all of my senses.

Now you might hear that and say, "Oh god, that's a lot of work." And the reality is, it's not. Now the work to clear up my brain initially, yeah, that's a lot of work sometimes. Especially the things that I really want to hold on to

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because I think I'm right. Right, that's a lot of work, for sure, sometimes. Sometimes it's a lot of fun work. Tending to the roots beneath the soil of my being, yeah, that can sometimes be a bit of work because it can be a bit dark.

But what I'm really committed to is that state of presence, because what I'm committed to is to be the very, very best yoga therapist that I can be. And to really serve the people so that my talents can come out and make a big, big difference for people who are ready for that. And so I'm just committed to it, so it becomes fun in all the work.

And then listening becomes a breeze, and easy, and just dare I say it's like an honor to be able to be in the presence of somebody else sharing their story. And as I even say that there's tears sort of in behind my eyes. Because everyone's story is so sacred, everyone's story is so remarkable in its beauty. Even when we might not perceive what we're hearing as to be beautiful.

But it's the human experience and to bear witness to that experience, that is where something so simple and so clear can set the stage for a very profound healing relationship between myself and a client. It's powerful, powerful stuff. And it can come from this place of listening. Not so much from a to-do place, but from truly being present.

So if you're willing and wanting to take this on, here are a couple things that you can play with. When you are listening to your client next, simply ask yourself, or your spouse or your kids, ask yourself are you actually listening? Or are you running through the list in your head? Are you preparing to talk? Are you getting ready to interrupt?

Are you ready to share a story of your own self? Because you're coming from the greatest place in your heart of wanting to add into the story, and are you actually doing that? Are you using a technique? Are you seeing if the technique works or are you actually being present to that other being? Just try it on and see what happens.

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And if you want to deepen this experience, we are doing another therapeutic yoga intensive this coming week on Saturday, it's for health professionals only. We had two spots open up so you can join us starting on Saturday.

You can read more at therapeuticyogaintensive.com. You can also email us at health@functionalsynergy.com. It would be such an incredible honor to work with you. Have a great time exploring.