

Tips on Listening
from the Companionship Training
Pathways to Promise (pathways2promise.org)

Robin Kempster, Parish Nurse
Mental Health Ministry
First Church Berkeley, UCC

Listening is one of the most important practices of Companionship. By listening to a person's story and truly hearing it, we can begin to see more clearly what the possibilities are and what the next steps of supporting the person might be.

Tips on listening:

1. It is a gift simply to listen.

- Listening to someone is special. You are not interrupting or giving advice, rather being a listening presence.
- You can affirm that you are listening to a person by nodding, saying "I hear what you're saying", maintaining eye contact.

2. Listen for feelings and themes.

- Listen for what the person is feeling: Is there worry? hopelessness? anxiety? hope?
- You can acknowledge feelings..."That sounds hard"; "That sounds scary", "That's good to hear".
- Are there common themes? Loneliness? Isolation? Yearning for relationships? A chance to meet others? A need for food or shelter?
- You won't have all the answers as a listener, and that is OK.

3. Listen to yourself.

- As a person talks, it may trigger a memory of your own of a similar situation or feeling. This is not a time to talk about your own story.
- Rather, you can say "That sounds really sad", "I hear what you're saying".

4. Take care with your responses.

- Say "Tell me more about that" or "How did that make you feel?" These responses can encourage the person to share more with you.
- Ask for elaboration or clarification, from their point of view, not yours.

5. Listen over time and in community.

- A person's story may come out over time, over a number of encounters. We learn the complexity of the person over time.
- Having a third person involved in conversation can widen the support.

6. Listen for words of faith, hope and love.

- Listen for the person's strengths and gifts.
- Where have they found comfort and support? Where is their anchor?

7. Be open to a person's spiritual story.

- Is this a person of faith? Do they receive comfort from music, nature or other source?
- You can affirm their faith and sources of comfort.