

Stickley, T. & Freshwater, D. (2006). The art of listening in the therapeutic relationship, *Mental Health Practice*, 9, 12-19.

In this article, the authors assert that therapeutic communication and particularly active listening is the foundation to effective nursing care and positive patient outcomes. They cite work by Fielding and Llewelyn that states "communication is both one of the most demanding and difficult aspects of a nurse's job, and one which is frequently avoided or done badly although central to the quality of patient care". Active listening is overlooked as nursing practice continues to become more technically focused and nursing effectiveness is evaluated by the patient's response to measurable technical interventions, treatments or medication. Listening is not a "visible" skill conducive to outcome measures. The authors believe that listening is an "art" rather than a technique. Referencing an earlier article by Freshwater, they point out that "when we listen, it is not just to what is being said, nor simply to the content of the dialogue, but also to how it is being said". Effective listening requires self awareness in order to truly understand what the patient is conveying without being colored by the nurse's own experiences and feelings. "The ability to listen to others is entwined with the ability to listen to oneself." The authors stress the importance of practicing self-reflection and self-inquiry in order to increase self-awareness. The nurse must convey an understanding by reflecting back the patient's message. "What we all benefit from is the knowledge that we have been understood by another, and that the other has not judged us and has accepted us for who we are." Therapeutic listening is essential in creating a caring, healing environment. The authors conclude their article by stating "What society needs more than anything from the (nursing) profession is greater compassion and understanding, not greater technical ability and powers of control".

This article made me step back and think about my past experiences with patients and also with family and friends. It made me recall times when I was too quick to problem solve for the patient before truly hearing and understanding his whole story. I, myself, find it frustrating when someone begins to problem solve for me before I am finished relaying my situation. I also recalled times when I was very quick to take the patient's first response at face value. One such exchange went something like this: "Hi Mrs. S. How have you been since I last saw you?" Mrs. S. automatically responded with, "Oh, I'm doing O.K., maybe a little better, it hard to say". Without thinking I replied, "Well a little better is an improvement - that's great. I'm going to get started with listening to your lungs." If I were more self aware, I might have recognized and set aside my anxiety about doing her physical assessment and asked her what she meant by "alittle better". Maybe I would have recognized her facial expression. If I was more attentive, she may have trusted me more and I would have started to create a caring and healing environment.

The article also gave me a deeper appreciation for the relationship between a nurse and patient. It seems to me that without utilizing active listening, we short change the patient. The caring, healing environment discussed in the article is impossible to create without active listening. It seems to me that if we overlook the importance of a caring environment we are not practicing nursing but are going through the motions of completing job responsibilities. And so - nursing is an art.