Chapter 5 ~ Listening to Your Self

The intention of this chapter is to encourage you really to listen to and appreciate yourself – to recognize the vast amount of experience, strength and wisdom that is yours to tap into, if you take the time and make it important enough. Because you are multi-faceted, there are lots of different sides of yourself to connect with and lots of different approaches for doing so. I will offer a selection of methods for you to try out and hopefully you will become excited at the possibilities and continue to explore other books and resources.

Don’t get bogged down in the specific techniques, however helpful; they are just tools for accessing your own answers and solutions. The bottom line is to keep asking yourself the core questions that, one way or another, this book has been prompting you to address:

- What is really true for you?
- What do you really want?
- What is the best way forward for you?

Listening to yourself is central to having a good relationship with yourself, and hence making the most of your life and opportunities. It interlinks with and supports the other aspects of the SELF model – Sustaining, Empowering and Friendship.

You cannot sustain yourself if you don’t know what you need. All too often we censure awareness of our needs in accordance with what is acceptable to others and to our own, socialized self-image. In so doing, we deny and suppress many aspects of ourselves that, if taken care of, would support us more in everything we do.

You cannot empower and respect yourself if you don’t know who and what is there to be empowered and respected. You cannot use your strengths if you don’t know them and you cannot gain the satisfaction and impetus of living aligned to your values and vision if you don’t know what they are. If you don’t listen to yourself, you risk living from scripts and ‘shoulds’ which may sound good but leave you feeling hollow and dissatisfied.

And you cannot offer yourself friendship if you are not ready to listen. That is part of what friends do.

While, strictly speaking, listening implies hearing sounds or words, I use the term more broadly to include anything where you pay close attention to, connect with and give importance to what is going on with you and what you are about. You can listen to your words or thoughts and you can also listen to your feelings, intuitions, and anything else that results...
in your knowing yourself more fully. When you notice something, you may then articulate it in words by asking yourself, ‘What is this telling me?’

Listening can involve putting special time aside to tune-in and connect with yourself. It can also take place in the activity of everyday life, when you pay attention to your responses to situations and to what you really think, feel, need and want. Deep listening is not passive: it requires intention and commitment.

**Aspects of good listening**

**The experience of being listened to**

Let’s start by considering what it is like really to be listened to by another person.

**Reflection point – experience of listening**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remember a time when you really felt listened to.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>What was the experience like? What did you feel?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>What supports really effective listening?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>What gets in the way of deep listening?</em></td>
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I often ask these questions of coaches in training. Here are some typical responses.

Experiences of being really listened to include:

- Safety, space, acceptance, being understood, love, connection, being okay, being fully heard and seen as unique, being validated, hearing yourself more clearly, finding out about yourself, being cared about, a sense of relaxation and peace, being empowered.

The things that contribute really to listening to someone include:

- Valuing the person, patience, being fully present, genuine interest, lack of judgment, making enough time, lack of agenda on the part of the listener, ability to hear and reflect back what is said, confidentiality, caring about them.

Obstacles to real listening include:

- Outside distractions, time pressure, an agenda of what should be being said or present, rehearsing a reply rather than just being present and listening, wanting to fix
the person, thinking about something else, presuming you already know what is going to be said.

It becomes evident that the experience of really being listened to is a wonderful and yet rare gift in today’s busy world. And so it makes it particularly important that you learn to listen to yourself, as well as learning to listen to others.

Listening for coaches
As you go through this book, you are learning to coach yourself and the heart of good coaching is listening. Here is a top ten of listening tips I give to coaches.

Top 10 tips for becoming a better listener

Attitude
1. Develop a deep respect for people and their uniqueness. Realize that, however much experience you have had, you have never listened to THIS person at THIS time before. Become deeply fascinated by people.

2. Develop a deep respect for people’s ability to find and commit to their own solutions. Being really heard can, in itself, be a very powerful and empowering experience.

3. Develop a deep respect for the power of synergy and for your intuitions that come about as a result of connecting through listening. This may seem paradoxical to the previous point. You do have perspectives to offer people. The key point is whether you NEED to do that or can offer it as appropriate.

Ways of Listening
4. Listen TO what is being said well enough that you could reflect it back using the same language and phrases. We all need to feel that our story is heard and acknowledged the way we present it.

5. Listen WITH them. Be able to step into their shoes and connect with them as fellow human beings beyond the words and the situation.

6. Listen FOR all the different information that is being presented in words, nuances, tones of voice and silences. This includes the current and desired reality, strengths and values, motivations (positive and negative), recurring patterns, unmet needs and more.
**Skills to Develop**

7. Practise listening to, and taking care of, yourself so that your own needs are met and you are able to be fully present as you listen to another. This includes being free of the need to ‘fix’ people. Then you can focus on THEIR agenda rather than your own.

8. Become comfortable with silence AND, at the same time, don’t rely on it. A pause at the end of what has been said can often encourage someone to go into greater depth. On the other hand, they may require a response, question or encouragement to continue. Trust yourself to know when to speak and when to stay silent.

9. Trust yourself also to ask the right question or to say what is needed at the appropriate time, rather than preparing it as you listen. Often we have heard only a fraction of what is said before mentally preparing our solution. If what you say doesn’t seem right, don’t panic. Let it go and try something else.

10. Finally, don’t become a clone of some technique you have learned. Adapt your style to whatever is or is not working with THIS person NOW. Some need silent listening, some need their words reflected back, some need effective questioning, some need endorsement, some need challenging and some need whatever it is you are going to make up as you go!! Listening is an art more than a science and involves the heart as well as the head.

Apply this to listening to yourself:

**Reflection point – listening to yourself**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you ready to be present, patient and non-judgmental with yourself?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you ready to find out who you are, and what is going on with you,</td>
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<tr>
<td>rather than what you think should be there?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you ready to create time and space to be with yourself, away from</td>
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<tr>
<td>outside distractions, and without an agenda?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you ready to hear something different today from yesterday as you</td>
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<tr>
<td>evolve and change and go deeper into yourself?</td>
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**Truth telling**

In order for you to make conscious, positive changes, you need to tell the truth about what you want to have happen and about what is currently happening. Truth telling is not about looking good or getting gold stars and it can only happen in an atmosphere of acceptance and positive regard. If you judge someone, have lots of pre-conceptions about how they
should be, and if you are likely to tell them how awful they generally are, then it is not too likely that they will reveal much of themselves to you. In fact, that would be a pretty silly thing to do!

In the same way, the more that you are ready to accept yourself as you are, the more open and real you can be with yourself. Then you have a foundation for being more effective in whatever it is that you want to do. It is like going on a journey. Suppose I want to go from Inverness to Newcastle but I think it would be more glamorous if I were starting from Paris, so I convince myself that this is where I am! Planning the route and making the bookings is going to be a strange and frustrating experience … .

The emphasis on dealing with the truth of ‘what is’ in any situation, rather than with what should be there or what you would like to be there, is fundamental to all coaching interactions. Small businesses frequently fail because the owners think that the public should want what they have to offer, rather than finding out and responding to what the public actually do want. Leaders frequently emphasize how their staff should be motivated, rather than finding out what does motivate them. Relationships go awry when you blinker yourself and see only what you want to see in your partner, rather than responding to how they really are.

Creating visions or goals based on what you should want, or what you think looks good to other people, results in burden and struggle. So whatever you’re involved in, a good coach will always encourage you to tell the truth about what you are dealing with and what you want.

**Reflection Point – telling the truth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where do you avoid telling the truth about things?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is this costing you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the one truth that you would most benefit from taking on board?</td>
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What is ‘true for you’ is an expression of how you see things and what you are about, now. It does not mean that this is, or should, be the ‘truth’ for somebody else. It may take time and persistence to get to the core of what is really true for you. On top of this, what is true for you will change with time and experience. To listen to yourself is an ongoing process and not something which can be done once, summarized and taken for granted.
Throughout the book so far I have been encouraging you to listen to yourself, particularly through the different reflection points. They all encourage you to go past superficial replies, and ideas of how you should be, and to stand up for what is really true for you – at this time. We will now look together at some other listening areas and approaches.

**Different approaches to listening to yourself**

When communicating with and finding out about yourself, there are different approaches and methods that you can explore. Some are more left-brain and logical, some are more right-brain and intuitive while some are a combination of the two.

They all involve becoming more present and conscious of what is going on with you. Thinking actively and consciously is a very different experience from being deluged with the automatic, background thoughts that frequently occupy us. In the same way, consciously listening to the nuances of your feelings and inner promptings is very different from being swayed by unconscious emotions and reactions. And talking with awareness and reflection is very different from just churning out your story.

Most people make nowhere near enough time available really to get to know themselves, or consciously to consider their choices and responses to different situations. Pressures and busyness take over and the intention to take some time out can easily get lost. In the thick of the action it can be difficult to get an overview and to make clear decisions about the way forward. That is why, in battle, experienced commanders will sometimes take themselves to a nearby hilltop where they can think clearly, get an overview and plan their campaign before re-joining the troops.

There are two aspects of connecting with yourself to consider:

- Firstly, the practice of quietening down and simply spending quality time with yourself, as you ideally would with a friend or one of your family. Getting to know yourself in depth through reflection, silence, and other non-verbal activity.
- Secondly, when there is a situation that you are involved in or want to make a decision about. Being able to connect fully with your experience, thoughts, intuition and wisdom so as to make your decision from the most informed and resourceful state.

We’ll start by considering approaches where you put aside special time to listen to yourself. Later, we’ll also look at some ways for connecting and checking-in with yourself that don’t take much time and which you can do during the day.

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Creating space and quietening down

Many of us live very busy lives, in the course of which we are bombarded with information, ideas and emotional hooks. Even when you are alone, thoughts, messages and emotions from the day can continue to dominate you. They are like static that prevents you from tuning into yourself. In order to be your own person, and to draw on your real power, you need to be able to detach somehow from this background static and allow it to quieten down. As you do this, you strengthen the observer and chooser in you. This is the part of you who is aware of, and appreciates, your thoughts and feelings and yet is separate from them and has a choice in how to deal with them. You have thoughts and feelings, yet you are more than your thoughts and feelings.

As the chooser and authority in your own life, you can learn to acknowledge and listen to the different parts that make up your personality, integrate them and choose the overall direction in which you will go forward. You are like the conductor of an orchestra listening to the different players, cueing some in, quietening others down and integrating them into some kind of harmony. Being able to detach from passing thoughts and feelings and being able to reside more in this aspect of yourself, as the observer and chooser, gives you a great sense of stability and strength. From this place of inner calm, you are far better equipped to travel through the ups and downs of life.

Ways of connecting with this place in yourself, that work for different folk, include meditation, reflection, and a variety of everyday activities and pastimes. Anything that allows you to be more focused in present time, to let go of your busyness and to be less overtaken with regrets about the past or worries about the future, can work.

Meditation

Most meditation practices involve sitting in a balanced and relaxed position and gently focusing your attention on something in present time – whether it is the sensation of your breath entering and leaving your nostrils, a word or sound, or perhaps a picture of some kind. As thoughts and emotions come and go, you notice them and gently bring your focus back to your chosen object of attention. Through practice, your ability to stay centred and not to be taken over by thoughts and emotions gets stronger. Other benefits include relaxation and, occasionally, insights that come from a deeper place of knowing. There are numerous books and courses available on meditation. Some are aligned with a particular spiritual perspective while others are more purely practical in nature. *The Relaxation Response*, by Dr Herbert Benson (Avon Books, 2000), takes the latter approach.

Here is one simple meditation practice you can try, based on being aware of your breathing. Start by sitting comfortably, with your arms and legs uncrossed, and your back gently upright.
without straining. You can sit on cushions or on a chair – whichever suits you. If you use a chair, have both feet flat on the floor and rest your hands on your thighs or in your lap. If possible, set a timer for 20 minutes, or whatever time you decide to give it, so that you don’t need to keep looking at the clock. Now close your eyes and simply notice the sensation of the breath going in and out of your nostrils. Don’t try and control the breathing in any way. Just follow it. If you realize that your attention has been taken over by other things, don’t make a big deal about it or give yourself a hard time – and don’t try to fight the thoughts or stop them. Simply acknowledge that your attention has wandered and bring it back to noticing the flow of breath. At first, it is very common for your attention to wander a lot of the time, but with practice you will find it easier to stay focused.

**Connecting with yourself through an activity**

If meditation doesn’t do it for you then there are lots of other approaches. Connecting with yourself does not have to involve some special or esoteric discipline. Any simple activity can become a kind of meditation practice, if you keep bringing your attention back to your experience in the present time. I used to enjoy running outdoors, being aware of my breathing and the rhythm and sound of my feet touching the ground. Walking in nature, while hearing the sounds and seeing the things around me is similar. I have had clients who found that they were most present and relaxed while doing the ironing. Others find that painting and drawing or listening with full attention to music they love has the same effect.

What you do is not as important as how you do it. For you, it might be gardening, exercise, sewing, taking a leisurely bath, or any activity that you enjoy and which allows you to become present, to let go of the swirl of ongoing concerns and to tune into yourself. If you already have something that works well for you, choose to do it regularly. Schedule it in before everything else, rather than hoping that it will happen and knowing that most times it won’t! If you don’t already have something that works for you, choose something from the ideas in this chapter to start with. Again, schedule regular times for it before filling your diary.

There are also numerous relaxation tapes and CDs available to help you quieten down and connect with yourself. If you use one regularly, you will find that you don’t need to focus so much on the words and can simply sink down inside yourself. One that I have produced is *Coming Home to You*, based on the Alexander Technique. (This is available at the members’ section at [www.self-factor.com](http://www.self-factor.com).)

**Reflection point – ways that work for you**

| What has worked best for you, in the past, to quieten down and to connect with yourself? |
| What other methods might you like to explore? |
| What will you choose to do in the next month? |