

Good Listening Skills

**Compassionate listening seeks to create emotional safety for a more thorough exploration of emotions and issues necessary for growth and healing.
Listening begins with a genuine love and respect of others.**

What to do . . .

- Create a safe, quiet and open space for the conversation.
- Convey your intent to deeply listen to what is happening.
- Be open to the speaker's story as they wish to tell it.
- Notice the emotions behind the story. Report emotions as part of what you are hearing.
- Be aware of their body language and what's not being said.
- Repeat back what you hear, inviting clarity of meaning and further exploration.
- Be attentive to your own emotional reactivity to what is being shared. (Your feelings will help you understand theirs.)
- Be respectful of the veteran's experiences.
- Be aware of your own biases.
- Follow the speaker's lead.
- Be okay with silence.
- Seek to understand the emotional meaning not just the details they are conveying.
- Maintain confidentiality unless harm is threatened.
- Be aware of the contexts of their lives (mind, body, spirit and relationships).
- Keep an ear open to the spirit of God.
- Stay with the person in the here and now. Be aware when the conversation revolves around "externals" like weather or football.

What not to do . . .

- Do not ask too many questions (3 max!) – Don't interrogate or probe.
- Do not give advice.
- Do not judge by either glamorizing or demonizing them.
- Do not try to fix their problems.
- Do not offer simplistic religious answers.
- Do not try to top their stories.
- Do not make the conversation about you.
- Do not promote stigmatization.

Ministering to Veterans and Their Families

What to do . . .

- Listen, Listen, Listen.
- Create safe spaces both physically and interpersonally so you can be a safe person with whom they can speak about their journey.
- Be willing to hear confessions of guilt and shame.
- Help the veteran explore his/her new understandings of meaning, purpose and relationship with God.
- Refer to VA resources.
- Assist and refer with matters of housing, finances, and employment.
- Educate yourself and congregation regarding the needs of returning veterans and their families. Consider upgrading worship facilities for handicap accessibility.
- Invite your congregation to send care packages to military personnel in the field.
- Invite veterans to participate in outreach ministries that fit their new identity.
- When a family member is deployed, offer rides, meals, childcare and friendship to the family.
- Be mindful of how you might be heard by Veterans, military personnel and their family members when addressing issues of peace and justice.
- Work actively to reduce the stigma of seeking help for mental health challenges.

What not to do . . .

- Do not ask if they killed anyone; don't push for details regarding the deployment.
- Do not try to fix their problems for them.
- Do not attempt to assuage feelings of guilt or shame.
- Do not diagnose PTSD, assume PTSD or label PTSD.
- Do not assume the service member is "unsaved" or does not have a faith journey.
- Do not push to get service member involved in church ministries.
- Do not glamorize them or treat them as "heroes" or "show them off."
- Do not try to be their therapist. Know when and how to refer.
- Do not push toward or shy away from conversations about moral and spiritual injury.
- Do not expect parishioners/Veterans/Service members to know how best you can assist them; instead, be proactive and define your role and what you can and want to do to support them.