

ARE YOU LISTENING?

This month, **ALEX JAMES** considers one of the key attributes that a funeral director requires – the art of being a good listener

While considering my contribution for this month's edition I have been presented with several discussions about listening skills. I'd intended to write about what clientele think makes a good funeral director and asked a random selection of individuals to share their thoughts – most said a good listener, so, being a firm believer in serendipity I feel drawn to the subject of listening and hope that you'll find my thoughts and ideas a helpful contribution to your own skills.

As a counsellor the success of my practise relies on my ability to get alongside my client fundamentally in my listening skills. I am trained not only to hear what's being said but what isn't being said – this is demanding, exhausting sometimes, as all of my senses come into play I'm observing their body language, how they're sitting, how they move as they express themselves, their breathing, eye contact, tone and use of language as they work at communicating their experiences to me. We all want to be understood, it is a fundamental human need that we can convey our needs thoughts and feelings to others and when we are at a loss for words it can leave us frustrated but when we feel unheard it can have a massive impact not only on our emotions but on our self-esteem.

I'm sure, like me, you've experienced that conversation with another where you just know they aren't listening, although they are trying to present as though they are. At a conference recently I was approached by someone just as I was leaving, "Could I just ask you a quick question?" When someone says that, it's probably not going to be quick and as they were between me and the door my only polite option was to welcome their interest. Having engaged me they then spotted another, evidently more interesting

individual across the room and started to signal to the person that they would like to chat to them too. This evoked in me feelings of disregard, embarrassment, awkwardness and irritation and I felt generally devalued.

This happens to all of us at some time and for those of us working in fields where our listening skills are fundamental, the experience of not feeling heard ourselves can be a positive lesson towards being a better listener to our clientele. It's hard work isn't it? There are times where I just don't click with the client or I'm perhaps distracted by something – keeping focus is demanding, especially when the communication is from someone who may be in a very emotional state and not able to clearly express themselves as they usually might. This sense of not being able to express oneself – find the 'right words' – may lead to difficult behaviour. Difficult or disordered behaviour causes distress for all concerned and if we understand the feelings behind the behaviours, we can begin to put some order and meaning to the situation. The art of true listening is about being in the moment, being mindful of what the person communicating is trying to tell you and about acceptance. Sometimes we can feel as though we've completely got it right and there is a sense of unity with the client, they feel understood and supported and held...all is well. Sometimes we may feel we have that shared empathy and may assume we have understanding only to be told that we haven't, or be accused of not listening.

Sometimes assumptions and our need to direct can get in the way, we may use the wrong words or find ourselves telling the client how they feel or how we think they feel, it is then that we fall out of step with

them. It is so easy to use the wrong words but by expressing our desire to understand, being genuine and honest, we show our clients greater regard. When I experience this sense of not quite getting it, I have found that honesty is the way forward. I might say something like "do you mean?" or "Is this what you're saying", allowing time for my client to further express themselves.

When we are emotionally charged sometimes words fail us, our abilities to communicate become erratic, fragmented or silent. Silence can feel very uncomfortable for the listener, it can evoke feelings of awkwardness and anxiety and a sense of failure and desperation as we seek to break the emptiness. Although silence can be uncomfortable, it is also a part of communication and can provide a necessary space. For those who are grieving it can be a space to gather thoughts. They may be feeling confused or unable to focus and their distress may be preventing their intake of information. Allowing short silences can be reassuring, as it can give a sense of not trying to rush, that we are listening and regardful, that we care. After a short silence reassurance may be offered by saying something like "I am listening" or "take your time."

I began this offering by telling you that I had asked a small group of individuals their thoughts on what makes a good funeral director, the response was mostly a good listener. The expectation was that a good funeral director would listen to their story, facilitate their request and provide their loved one with exactly what they wanted. There were lots of stories about good funeral directors and these tended to be based on those who didn't rush them, didn't make assumptions or be over directive. "A good funeral director is someone who cares,

he/ she must be patient, supportive, not intrusive but above all a good listener.”

A large part of our training courses revolve around listening skills. I include some of them at the end of this piece and hope that you and your staff will find them useful and thought provoking.

1 WHO DO YOU TALK TO?

Spend a short time thinking about whom you would talk to if you were experiencing some personal difficulty – consider why you have chosen this person and compare the qualities they have to your own

2 CHECKING YOUR OWN FEELINGS

Consider feelings evoked when you have felt unheard and your reactions

3 FEELING OUT OF STEP

Consider how it feels when you are not connected or misinterpret another. Are you able to be honest , share your feelings and activate further expression from them?

4 ENVIRONMENT AND DISTRACTIONS

Consider your workplace and possible

distractions. If you are engaging in time limited meetings begin by explaining this to the client and have a clock that is visible to both parties so that you avoid being distracted by looking at the wall clock or wrist watch or feeling anxious by running over time. About 10 minutes before the end of a meeting, you can then openly acknowledge this and draw things to a close.

If you would like to know more about our Human Aspects bespoke training courses please contact me at alexjames@bereavement.co.uk or visit our website.

