



Conflict Resolution and the Art of Listening

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In working as an analyst and as a clinical psychologist, I've learned that it's best to listen, listen, listen, and then listen some more before responding. This course of action is especially wise whenever the person I am working with is upset. When it comes to conflict resolution strategies, at the top of the list is the art of listening.

Listening does not mean remaining silent while being focused on what you want to say next rather than what the other person is saying. Listening means being fully present as you take in what a person says verbally and nonverbally. Don't think about what you might say next, or try to anticipate what they will say or do. Don't let your mind wander.

Good listening also requires tuning in to the other person's tone of voice, words, and body language. Their mood and hidden thoughts and feelings can be conveyed in subtle ways. Can you listen with all your senses?

" By practicing the art of listening, you can make it more likely that any conflicts you experience will be productive, less hurtful, and more likely to lead to resolution and connection.

In martial arts, there are two important concepts, kime and ma. Ma is keeping the right distance, and kime is focus. I have applied ma and kime in my psychological and analytical practices, and in business dealings as well. By not being too quick to engage someone who appears to be angry or upset, you practice ma. Conflicts can arise quickly if you do not take the time to listen at the right distance and you engage too soon, while the person you are dealing with is emotionally overwrought. It is a challenge to keep your distance from another person's anger and to listen intently without becoming emotionally involved yourself. Good listening involves ma and kime (focusing on what you are hearing). When you practice kime, you react to what you are hearing in a timely and appropriate way: the right response at the right time, with just the right amount of words.

Like everyone, you have an aspect of consciousness called the observing self, which can unemotionally witness another person's sarcasm and aggressive or defensive stance without generating aggressiveness or defensiveness within you. It allows you to see when you are not being threatened and to remember that another person's behavior and emotions may have little if anything to do with you. As you focus on taking in cues about another person's state of being, feelings, and thoughts, the observing self keeps you feeling steady on your feet, grounded in the awareness that you may not have all the information you need in order to know what is actually happening versus what appears to be happening.

When I was first learning martial arts, I was taught that if you remain loose until the last moment before making an assertive move, tightening only at that point, your action will have greater impact. If you are tight, you will get tired out and will be slow—and when you make your "move," it will have less impact. If you are too loose, and don't tighten up at the right moment, your move won't have much force. Similarly, when someone seems to be upset with you, remain loose, listening in a focused way. When the time comes to speak, focus: Your words will have greater impact. After you have spoken, become loose again, listening carefully. Then, when the other person is finished, acknowledge what has been said. You might repeat their words back to them, and think or say, "You may have a point there." Leave a pause before saying what you feel you need to say. Your focus on what is happening in the moment as each moment unfolds before you opens the eyes of your observing self. It restrains your ego, the aspect of your awareness that wants to defend you and fight back.

If you are too distant from the other person, not listening and not focused on what is being said in the present, your wandering mind may miss something important that is being communicated. It is natural to want to step back from someone who is crying or showing emotions that make you feel uncomfortable—or you may prematurely try to comfort them, before they have had the opportunity to fully express themselves. If you can remain present, observing as they speak, you will be at just the right distance to truly hear what they are saying. You will improve your listening skills and be able to pick up on the word, the inflection, the gesture, or the tone of voice that tells you what you might otherwise miss.

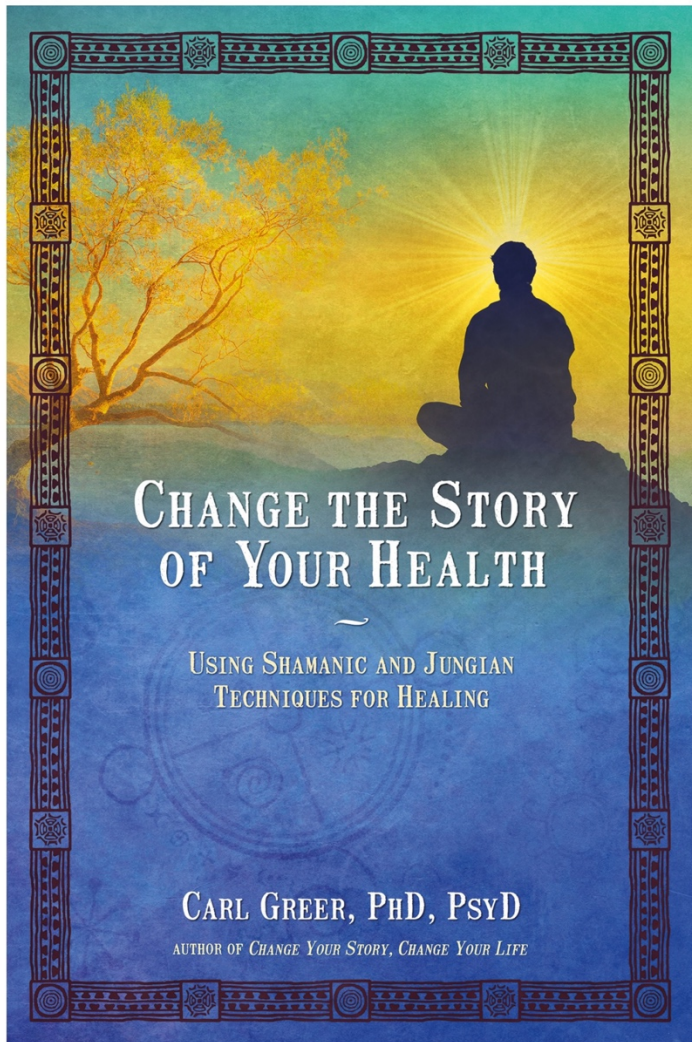
Perhaps your careful, focused listening at the right emotional distance will reveal that behind the other person's anger is hurt and behind the hurt is shame. Perhaps it will reveal that you are not hearing all that you need to hear to truly understand what they are feeling and thinking. Maybe you will even come to see mistakes you have made.

So when in a conflict, remain present, practicing the art of listening, practicing kime and ma: focus at the right distance. Be loose and listen, and tighten up to make a point only when the time is right. Remember that conflict resolution is easier when you do not add fuel to the fire of someone's anger, or retreat into defensiveness and shut off your ability to hear what the other person is saying. If you remain patient, and wait, you will see that the force of strong emotions and harsh words starts to dissipate.

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Of course, other strategies are available to you as well. You can avoid conflict by speaking with care, choosing words that don't inflame. Avoid blame and make statements about how you feel and what you are thinking and experiencing. Accusations make it different for the other person to listen, to pay attention to all that you are expressing. Defensiveness can intensify conflicts, so let your observing self arise. Then, take care to say what you need to say while leaving room for the other person to listen—and room for the emergence of that person's observing self. By practicing the art of listening, you can make it more likely that any conflicts you experience will be productive, less hurtful, and more likely to lead to resolution and connection.



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