

Traits of a GB Relationship: Practice Good Listening and Show Empathy

This series on the unique traits of a God Buddy relationship provides practical ways to help us develop deeper friendships and become better men. My prior posts explained that Finding Commonality helps Develop Trust which leads to complete Confidentiality so you can demonstrate Vulnerability, Authenticity, and Transparency. The next trait is to Practice Good Listening and Show Empathy.

First, let me ask you a personal question: Are you a good listener or a bad listener?

If you are honest, really honest, you are NOT a good listener. Few of us are.

Is This Your Story?

Here is a scenario that may resonate with you.



Your wife often gets frustrated because you just don't seem to care when she tries to have a conversation with you. As she walks into the living room to talk, your eyes stay glued to the TV set or computer or your phone. As she talks, it seems like she gets very little of your attention. "Uh-uh...sure dear...uh-uh...whatever you want," you say, all the while never making eye contact with her.

She doesn't want anything extravagant. She simply wants you to turn off the TV or put the phone down, turn to face her, and give her your undivided attention. But we rarely do!

People tend to think much more highly of themselves than they actually deserve, especially with regard to our listening skills. What would your spouse or children say about your listening skills? How about your best friend or co-worker?

Here are some of what causes a person to be a poor listener:

- **We're impatient.** Impatient people are not able to appreciate or be fully engaged in the present circumstances and hear their friend out. An impatient person demonstrates that they really don't care about what their friend has to say.
- **We interrupt.** Bad listeners tend to interrupt others before they are finished. Their thought or opinion is so pressing that they blurt things out, even before the other person is done speaking. They're thinking about what they have to say before they finish. They want to show their own knowledge or offer help before they really understand their friend's circumstances.
- **We're easily distracted.** Concentration is hard in today's fast-paced society and we want the easy way out. Think about your listening abilities during a Sunday morning sermon. Do you zone out? Does your mind wander to other things—work, what you're doing that afternoon, a conversation with your spouse or a friend that morning? Zoning out or being easily distracted makes for bad listening.

Consider the biblical picture of a bad listener—the proverbial fool according to the writer of Proverbs: *“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion”* (Proverbs 18:2) and *“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him”* (Proverbs 29:20).

The fool doesn't listen to understand. They find pleasure in speaking more than they listen. Their pride or selfishness or lack of love doesn't allow them to take time to understand before offering any counsel.

If any of this describes you, you need to work really hard to become a better listener who shows empathy.

Becoming a good listener



The profile of a good listener is the quite opposite of the proverbial fool. A good listener is patient, focused, and doesn't talk too much. He lets the other person finish without interrupting. He listens for "the period" (the end of the person's statement) before talking. He puts the needs of others before his own and works hard to listen for understanding.

Showing Empathy



Empathy is an important trait that requires a practice called active listening in which you fully concentrate and understand what is being said. It includes a response with confirmation such as “What I think heard you say is...”. Showing empathy is also not critical, suspicious or judgmental.

What is the Difference?

People often confuse empathy and sympathy. While not mutually exclusive, nor always felt in tandem, there is a difference. Both mean caring for another person but empathy means the caring is enhanced by feeling the other person’s emotions. It requires believing and participating in the other’s experience at a personal level.

There may be times that require showing both sympathy and empathy.

For example, sympathy with empathy is when someone who lost a relative can receive sympathy from many people. However, only those who have also experienced the loss of a loved one are able to truly empathize.

A case where there might be sympathy but no empathy is when someone files for bankruptcy. Most people who care about that person would feel sympathetic to the situation. However, relatively few can empathize since only a minority of us ever go through the experience of filing for bankruptcy themselves.

Biblical Support

Contrast the proverbial fool in the above verses from Proverbs with the advice we get from the apostle James, the brother of Jesus.

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”

– James 1:19

James’ encouragement is to be practice quick hearing and not speak quickly.

Additionally, one of the first leaders of the early church, Peter counseled Christians to be of “one mind” by treating one another with compassion, love, tenderness, and courtesy—the four qualities at the heart of empathy.

“be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous”

– 1 Peter 3:8, NKJV

Being of “one mind” is showing deep compassion for each other.

The apostle Paul also tells us to support our brothers and sister with empathy.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ”

– Galatians 6:2

GBs Become Great Listeners

Empathetic and active listening is essential to being a good God Buddy. When your friend is in mourning or despair from a devastating loss or misfortune, you can help bear their burdens by showing great empathy. Become part of their story. Just feel it with them and don’t try to fix anything unless they ask for your help. Be patient and kind. Listen well.

Studies show the average person spends about 35% of their time talking and only 40% listening. Given that disparity, I suggest we can all listen better... after all, God gave us two ears and only one mouth!

Another important step is to confess your poor listening ability to your God Buddy (see Psalm 51:3-4). But that is the topic for another upcoming post.

Do you have any suggestions to improve our empathetic

listening skills? Comments are welcome below.