

Co-Listening

A pragmatic peer support method for employee wellbeing during Covid

by Myrna Jelman – August 2020



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1 Why the need for Co-Listening

Across the world, the Covid-19 crisis has changed the way we work in organisations. Emotional maintenance rituals we didn't know we relied on have disappeared by switching our work to virtual: The water cooler conversation, team lunch, travelling to meetings or even to meeting rooms, dropping by someone's desk, etc.

Employees' emotional needs are left unaddressed and may build up into something less easy to manage than safeguarding a short amount of time for a weekly connection. For this reason, this paper offers a 30mins, simple, weekly process for peer support.

Co-Listening is inspired by the Co-counselling method, a method for peer personal development which requires around 40 hours of training. It was first conceived by Harvey Jackins and then further developed by John Heron and Dencey Sargent.

2 Setting up co-listening pairs

People first need to be paired up. This can be done voluntarily, randomly or matched by someone, but in all cases partners must both believe that they will work well together.

Pairing that work best are:

- Similar hierarchical levels
- Not working too close but also not in a totally different context or role
- When people already know each other, high trust

Before they start co-listening the first time, pairs need complete a simple check to ensure that there is no major transference or projection super-imposed on the co-listening partners. They do this by checking in turn if their partner reminds them of anyone. If they do, they answer three further questions:

1. "In what ways am I like that person"?
2. "What is left unsaid between you and that person"?
3. "In what ways am I different from that person?"

If partners find any unusual irritation or other transference feelings with their partner during subsequent sessions, they are advised to return to this de-identification process.

Everything that is said during these sessions is strictly confidential. As with every helping contract however, both partners need to have made an agreement that if a client is deemed a risk to themselves or others, their partner has a right and a duty to raise that concern with the relevant third party.

3 Co-listening sessions

This simple method totalling 30mins in time can be used once a week as a way to leave difficult experiences and emotions at work, in effect it acts as a 'Now wash your head' process.

The co-listeners need to find a place where they can speak freely. They can sit but they can also walk and talk if they prefer this option (We recommend a hands-free set up, i.e. phone in a pocket and headset on during the walk). They start co-listening: One person is the client, the other the listener for a total of 15 minutes and then they switch roles.

For the first 12 minutes, the client has time to express whatever they want or need to express. At 12 minutes, the co-listener makes the client aware of time and asks the client to wrap up their last thought and to conclude their session with the following two steps:

- **Self-validation:**

Highlighting something they value about themselves. Often, this will be linked to what they have explored out loud during their session, but sometimes not.

- **Make a decision, commitment or choice:**

The client then decides what they want to do as a result of their session. This may be a decision made, a commitment to a new habit or a change of attitude towards someone or themselves. If the client has no resulting action or commitment to make, they just say so and that is absolutely ok.



The session will thus have lasted 15mins. The partners then change role and repeat the process. The listener is now the client and vice versa (It is important to safeguard equality in time at all times as reciprocity helps people open up as they know their partner will have the exact same experience they have).

4 Role of the co-listener

The co-listener is charged with creating a non-judging environment, where they listen with a calm presence and an intention to allow space for their partner:

- They are not responsible for helping, solving, reassuring, teasing or concluding anything
- They may not even need to speak, respond or ask any questions during that 12 minutes if their partner fills the time with their own reflections
- They do not need to make reassuring faces, soothing sounds or anything else than listening non-judgementally. On the contrary, the emptier of thoughts or emotions they can be and thus being at their most available for their partner, the more useful they are.
- If the client wants to use his or her time in silence, they are also entitled to do so. Silence and space in the company of another can be healing for some more than words are. The time remains theirs till the end.

5 References

Co-counselling

Heron, J. (1998) 'Co-Counselling Manual', third and revised edition 1998

6 About the author

Myrna Jelman specialises in Leadership and Organisation Development and especially in creating transformative learning experiences for both personal and organisational learning. She is also an executive coach and group facilitator.

She has worked with numerous organisations in the private, public and humanitarian sectors, often at an international level. She holds a MSc in Occupational Psychology and an MSc in Change Agent Skills and Strategies.



To all the readers of this article, I hope you will share this paper with those in a position to implement it in your teams and organisations.

This paper can also be found at:

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