

# dear residents

Listening Up Facilitates Speaking Up

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## Dear Residents,

By now you have had several interactions with patients, nurses, pharmacists, colleagues, consultants, attendings and administrators. There are lots of ongoing conversations. Healthcare is a team sport – notes are being written, pages are being sent and Epic chat is being populated. Patients are probed, family members chime in and there are alarms, alerts and overhead announcements.

Patient safety and your safety depends on freely speaking up – but that alone isn't sufficient if we don't listen up. The Chinese character for listening tells us an important story. We listen with our ears, we process what we hear with our mind, we pay attention with our eyes, we focus on what we see and hear, and we care about it all with our heart.

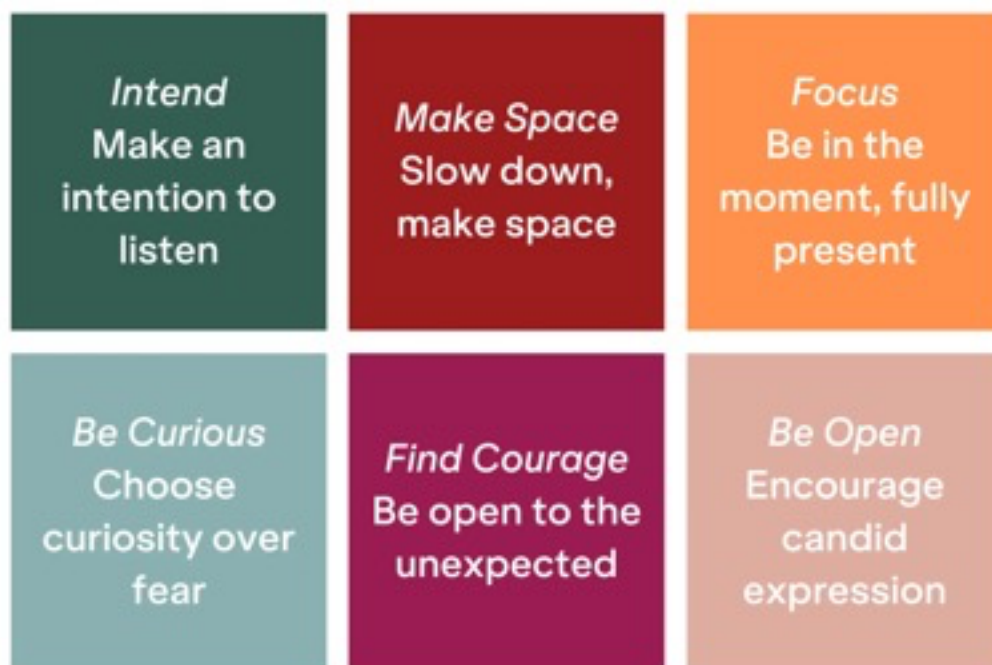


It takes quite a bit of patience and practice to listen well. I have been on rheumatology consults for the last two weeks and have done my best to listen well – we are consulting on several patients – one who speaks clearly but without any coherent thought and another who is mute (both have lupus cerebritis but are polar opposites where it comes to speech). Sometimes I feel the pressure to rush a conversation. I counter that by sitting in a chair at the bedside. I often end with asking if they have any further questions.

The students and residents on the team have unearthed a ton on information from the patient and from their chart to create a logical narrative. I do my best to listen for as long as I can before my first interruption. The average physician interrupts a patient within the first 15 seconds. The average attending probably interrupts a trainee presentation within 30 seconds.

The tough moments arise when what we are listening to is uncomfortable for one reason or another. The person speaking to us has taken the brave step to let us know that something is wrong, unsafe, or unethical. The rheumatology fellows I am working with have politely corrected some of my diagnostic and therapeutic miscalculations. My approach has been to thank them quickly and readily admit the mistake and smile sheepishly. “I learn something every day” is how I save face! Occasionally I interrupt a student presentation but will ask for permission first. “Can I say something quickly about vasculitis before we continue?”

When solving tough problems, I do my best to listen with generosity – an idea that began with [Rachel Remen](#) and has been amplified by others like [Krista Tippett](#). *Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability— a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own best words and questions.*



<https://medium.com/@generouslistening/generous-listening-the-skill-you-need-most-in-the-new-world-of-work-4c139f76ea88>

If there is one phrase that defines residency training today, it is “work intensity.” Our patients are increasingly sicker, and while some are seeking healthcare for the first time, many have had previous encounters in several healthcare systems which requires much more time to process and reconcile the

information. Sick, complex patients with numerous healthcare encounters are the new normal and what gets squeezed out is that valuable human to human time, a vital stretch where we establish that relationship of trust with the patient. Whenever possible, it's best to mindfully slow down and build that space to listen with generosity.

In the curriculum we have incorporated [VitalTalk](#) – an essential tool to learn how to deliver tough news to patients, how to admit error and how to have goals of care conversations. I encourage you to peruse the website and [download the app](#).

We are a “learning residency program.” By that I mean the leadership is constantly learning by listening to you. In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, [Amy Edmonson](#) reminds us that *success requires a continuous influx of new ideas, new challenges, and critical thought, and the interpersonal climate must not suppress, silence, ridicule or intimidate.*

Do speak up and, in turn, I promise to listen up!

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