

Culture of Sharing & Receiving Others

Guidelines for Listening & Responding

SHARING

- Feel free to share at whatever level you are comfortable with.
- Feel free to share not just positive things in your story, but also things that have been difficult or frustrating. We are all in the process of growing and learning, and both the good and the bad have shaped us as people and could offer points of connection for others in their own journey.

LISTENING

The listeners play just as important a role as the people sharing. Here are some guidelines for when we are listening to others share their experiences:

- **Be present.** Give the sharer the gift of being fully present to them. Let's imagine ourselves as emotional, mental, and spiritual hosts to the sharer - offering them the hospitable space and active attention they need to share authentically.
- **Remain open and non-judgmental.** Each of us have unique experiences - good, bad, ugly, and sometimes controversial. Nobody is perfect, and everyone's story is different. Let's keep a posture of being open to receiving and accepting each other, wherever we're at, whatever our stories may be.
- **Refrain from unsolicited advice-giving.** If someone shares about a problem or struggle they're experiencing, we may feel the urge to fix it or to "help" them somehow. But this is not our purpose in this space. As listeners, we are here simply to receive others' stories and to meet them wherever they are in their journey. Of course, if the sharer or person speaking asks for suggestions or advice, it would be appropriate to do so, with respect and humility.
- **Refrain from jumping in with our own experiences.** When others are sharing their experiences, it is natural to feel like we relate to certain things they say or have experiences that feel similar. We may be tempted to interrupt and jump in to compare or share our own experiences. But if we are in a listening role, let's hold back from doing so, because it diverts attention away from the sharer and their space to speak.

RESPONDING

After a person shares, it is sometimes appropriate for the listeners to respond. Here are some things we WANT to do & things we DON'T want to do during this response time:

DO:

- **Ask clarifying or deepening questions.** If you didn't understand something the person shared, feel free to ask respectfully for clarification. Also, if there is something the sharer said that you want to hear more about, feel free to ask follow-up questions about it. Please distinguish that this is different from asking the person to provide substantiation for what they've shared, which can often feel confrontational rather than inviting.
- **Ask questions to understand the person sharing's inner-person and personal story.** In a posture of receiving a person, who they are, and their story, feel free to ask more about a person's journey, process, and personal experiences around the things they share. This is different from asking about their interests, positions, or knowledge on aspects of what they've shared.
- **Respect the person's boundaries (stated or implied) in what they're willing to share.** Personal stories and follow-up questions can sometimes become very intimate. If the person sharing declines to respond to a particular question or series of questions, or it becomes clear they intend to only go so far into certain aspects of their story, let's be

sensitive to that and pursue only as far as what allows them to feel safe.

- **Affirm or encourage.** Keep in mind that the person sharing has taken some risks in sharing authentically and vulnerably, so feel free to thank them, affirm them, or encourage them.

DON'T:

- **Offer unsolicited advice or suggestions.** As mentioned above.
- **Jump in with our own experiences.** As mentioned above. This is still not the time to bring in our own stories - the space still belongs to the person who just shared. During this time, we CAN say something like, "some things you shared really resonated with me - thank you for sharing that," without diverting attention away by going into details of our own story.
- **Respond out of a desire to impress or display insight.** If we want to respond to the person sharing, let's check our motives first: Are we responding in order to show off our knowledge or insight? If so, let's make a conscious decision not to respond in that moment.
- **Respond out of a desire to conclude the unresolved.** Let's refrain from simple or conclusive responses like "everything works out for the best in the end" or "God has a purpose for your struggle". Remember that we are all on journey, and we are all in the middle of stories still being written. Let's allow ourselves and others permission to be in an unresolved moment or experience without forcing a conclusion before it's written.
- **Be quick to interpret someone's experiences or "what God must be saying/doing" in someone's story.** We need to exercise suspending interpretation of what the person shares with us - in our external response (e.g., the words we offer) and internal response (e.g., our private thoughts). Let's be especially mindful when we try to affirm or encourage the person sharing - our personal interpretations, values, and perspectives often show up without us realizing it in our "positive" comments. [For example, "I really appreciate you sharing how God rescued you from some terrible influences. Praise the Lord!" Maybe the person sharing didn't actually share anything they felt carried any moral/immoral value. Or maybe the critical places in their journey where they felt they experienced God most significantly had nothing to do with the theme of rescue.]
- **Minimize a person's experiences.** Minimization is hardly ever done intentionally or consciously. This often happens when we believe we understand a person's experience (when we might not) and then we try to show support that ultimately misaligns with some aspect of what the person's shared. [For example, if someone has shared about struggling with depression, sympathizing that "I've felt really sad before, too" offers a disproportionate comparison of experiences - it minimizes the felt intensity of the person's experience. Or "we all go through hard times" minimizes the specific nuances of their experience.] Let's be mindful of how we understand a person's experience and how we choose to express that understanding.