
PARTNER GUIDE

Urban Confessional: A Free Listening Movement



We Believe

People need to be heard. There is value in simply listening to someone.

Our Mission

To provide compassionate, non-judgmental listening to anyone who needs to be heard.

How We Do This

We hold signs that read 'Free Listening' and allow people to talk, sing, dance, yell, cry, and share with us whatever is on their mind.

Are There Rules?

Rules? No. Guidelines? Yes. We call our guidelines the Keys To Listening.

Do We Give Advice?

No. We are not licensed professionals.



Keys To Listening

IMBALANCED CONVERSATION

Listening does not mean that you are silent. You are having an imbalanced conversation where most of the talking is coming from the person you are listening to. Feel free to ask questions (see below), offer verbal understanding, and, most of all, empathetically agree.

EMPATHETIC AGREEMENT

We are not here to change anyone's mind. If someone is saying things you do not agree with or you find distasteful, search yourself for a greater understanding, smile, and simply be there for them. If they ask for your opinion, simply say, "I'm only here to listen, but that's very interesting", or redirect the discussion back to them by complementing their intellect or passion for the issue. Then ask if there is anything else they feel passionately about.

NO BARRIERS

It is imperative that the speaker feel they have your entire attention. When someone approaches you, put your sign down and keep your arms uncrossed when possible. This sends the message that you are no longer available for anyone else and that you have committed to the person in front of you. Also, never use your phone or other devices, and avoid waving at or engaging with anyone else during your time with someone. The chance to have all of someone's attention is a rare event. This is our specialty.

RESPECT THE SILENCE

When moments of silence happen, allow them to happen. Resist the urge to fill the silence. It is often in these moments that the person will say what they have been scared to say, the thing weighing heaviest on their hearts. Stay there for them in the silence, and be patient. Let them fill it.

Principles

THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT GUIDE OUR LISTENING AND OUR MINDSET.

- We are passive opportunities for people to share with us what is on their minds and hearts. Try not to approach people; allow them to come to you.
- We are here for others. That's all. No agenda, no strings attached.
- We do not record anyone for use in future projects. The present moment is the only moment that matters. Journaling after the experience is encouraged, and performances based on a remembered experience are acceptable. To respect the integrity of the Free Listening experience, we do not record anyone while they share with us.

Listening Etiquette

A FEW THINGS THAT HELP US MAINTAIN A BASIC STANDARD OF LISTENING.

- Remove your sunglasses if possible.
- Make eye contact. We listen with our eyes and our hearts.
- While waiting, smile and make eye contact with passersby. Be approachable.
- Do not stand in groups of more than three. Too many people in one spot is intimidating.
- If you are asked to move from your location, move graciously. Do not engage in territorial conflict with authorities.
- Never assume anything about anyone. Always let the speaker share information voluntarily.
- Always offer to sit with someone if you feel they need more focused attention.
- You do not have to give money to people who ask for it. Listening is your contribution.

The Imbalanced Conversation: Questions

When listening, we practice the art of the Imbalanced Conversation:

80% listening, 20% redirected responses.

Below are the four types of questions that will redirect the conversation back to the person sharing and maintain the proper balance between the speaker and the listener.

OPEN QUESTIONS

These are often the most important questions. Open Questions require the speaker to think and respond. Often used to initiate contact with a curious would-be speaker ("How are you doing?" or "Where are you from?"), these questions can also be used to redirect the conversation when the speaker asks you questions. For example, if a speaker asks about your beliefs in God, you can redirect the conversation by asking the Open Question, "What are your beliefs in God?" or "What does God mean to you?" This communicates a genuine interest in their beliefs and stories, and helps maintain an Imbalanced Conversation.

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

These are questions that ask the speaker to clarify points of their story. Questions like "When did this happen?" or "How old were you?" or "Did you say you were home when this happened?" are the natural result of interest in their story. These questions show the speaker you are actively listening and are truly interested in understanding the details of their story.

The Imbalanced Conversation: Questions (continued)

LEADING QUESTIONS

These questions can be used to lead the speaker into more (or less) detail about their story. They are more specific than Open Questions and are best used to encourage the speaker to continue speaking about a particular topic, especially when you notice they want to talk about something but are a little nervous to get started. Questions like "How is your relationship with your wife now?" or "Have you been looking for work lately?" let the speaker know it's okay to continue talking about a difficult topic. These questions communicate trust and can inspire courage in the speaker.

POSITIVE REDIRECT

These questions can be used when you notice a speaker cycling into hopelessness. These are the types of questions to use after a degree of trust and intimacy has been established. Questions like "What's something you're grateful for?" or "What's the best thing about your life at the moment?" can give the speaker a new perspective and help stop a downward spin. Often, if the speaker is struggling with depression or despair, these questions serve to redirect their mindset and help to insure they leave you in a better place than when they approached you.

Listening During A Mental Health Crisis

If a person you are listening to is in the middle of a mental health crisis, or expresses suicidal thoughts or a desire to commit suicide, we encourage you to remain present, ask questions, keep them talking, and ask them if they want help.

Asking Positive Redirect Questions (see page 6) can help redirect the speaker's mindset into a new perspective, stop a downward or negative thought cycle, and ensure that they leave you in a better place than when they approached you.

If the speaker wants help, we encourage you to refer them to a local suicide helpline, or call a local suicide helpline and assist them through the call. There are local suicide helplines in each state and country, but the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255)** is a great option and resource.

An important note is to make sure that the speaker leaves you in a better place than when they approached you.

Here are some tips, taken from suicide prevention resources, that may help with talking, listening, and finding support for someone that may be suicidal:

- Be yourself. Let the person know you care, and that they are not alone.
- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Listen. Allow all expressions of feelings, and accept the feelings. No matter how negative the conversation seems, the fact that it exists is a positive sign.
- Be non-judgmental. Try not to debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or bad. Try not to lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support.
- Don't dare them to do it.
- Try not to act shocked. This will put distance between you.
- Don't be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.

Listening During A Mental Health Crisis (continued tips)

- Offer hope that alternatives are available, but try your best to not offer glib reassurance.
- Take action. Remove means, like weapons or pills.
- Get help from people, agencies, or organizations that specialize in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

On a slightly different note, if a person expresses a desire to hurt someone else, per our lawyers, we are not under any legal obligation to report them. Having said that, if someone expresses that they want to hurt another person, try to remain present, ask questions, and keep them talking.

If a listener truly believes and feels that someone is a serious threat to another person, then it is appropriate to call authorities. If someone says they want to hurt another person and you, as a listener, feel unsafe, it is imperative that you exit the situation.

Read through our Safety Guidelines on the next page for more details.

Safety Guidelines

THE NATURE OF WHAT WE ARE DOING MEANS THAT WE MAY BE IN NEIGHBORHOODS WHERE SAFETY NEEDS TO BE A CONSCIOUS CONSIDERATION.

HERE ARE SOME BASIC SAFETY LESSONS WE'VE LEARNED ON THE STREETS:

- Choose well-trafficked areas to Free Listen.
- Do not go Free Listening by yourself. Try to go in groups of 2 - 3 people, and make sure everyone is in eye contact of one another at all times.
- Dress casually. Don't "dress up" or try to look "nice".
- Don't bring bags or any personal belongings to a Free Listening event.
- Keep a constant eye on your surroundings.
- Do not allow anyone to use your phone.
- If you feel uncomfortable with someone, politely suggest that you include another listener. You can always listen in pairs, if this feels more comfortable and safe.
- You can say NO to someone if they ask you to do something.
- Come up with a catchphrase as a group in order to exit a conversation in the event that you feel unsafe. For example: if someone is making you feel unsafe, politely saying something like, "I'm so sorry but we have to meet up with our friend David" or "I'm so sorry but we have an appointment we need to get to" will allow you to exit the experience without offending the speaker. We use this as an indirect safety tactic to avoid inciting any aggressive responses from people who may make you feel unsafe.

How To Answer Common Questions

YOU WILL BE ASKED A LOT OF SPECIFIC QUESTIONS THAT MUST BE ANSWERED. HERE ARE SOME GOOD WAYS TO FRAME YOUR ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS.

Q: What are you doing this for?

A: For you.

Q: So, why are you doing this?

A: Well, we believe people have a lot on their hearts and minds, and we want to be there if they need to get things off their chest.

Q: Are you recording me or looking for material?

A: Not at all. I'm just here to listen. I'm here for you.

Q: Can I have your number?

A: I'm really just here to listen, but if you want to come back next week, I'll be here again.

Q: Can I have some money?

A: I'm just here to listen; that's my contribution.

These are not intended to be stock answers, just suggestions. The first three, however, are the cornerstones of our mission and intention.

How To Describe Us

As you listen, you may want to tell certain people about Urban Confessional and the Free Listening Movement. Tell them this:

“

*We're part of a movement
that believes people need
to be heard, seen, and
understood.*

”

If they want more info, invite them to visit:

- urbanconfessional.org
- facebook.com/urbanconfessional
- twitter.com/UCFreeListening
- instagram.com/urbanconfessional

Change Begins With Listening

Urban Confessional is dedicated to changing the world through the power of compassionate, non-judgmental listening.



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Being heard is so close to being loved that most people can't tell the difference.