

LARA/LARI and Empathy

Effective listening is one of the most important qualities of being an ally. This is a skill that does not necessarily come naturally. Being an effective listener is different from everyday conversation or speaking.

Effective listening includes:

- Setting aside your own agenda while someone else is speaking
- Hearing what people mean, not just what they say
- Responding to a speaker's feelings

Empathy is an important component of effective listening.

Empathy versus Sympathy:

- Empathy: Perceiving and responding to the feelings of another person while remaining in touch with your own feelings.
- Sympathy: Losing touch with the feelings of the other person by reacting to your own feelings. Sympathy is something you feel.

Empathy also involves **Reflective Listening**. You listen for a feeling, relate to that feeling, and then reflect or restate that feeling back. Reflective statements consist of three parts: the **prefix**, the **feeling word**, and the **source of the feeling**.

1. The prefix is a phrase that communicates the listener's impression or interpretation of what the speaker is feeling. For example:

It sounds like you feel...

I'm wondering if...

I sense that you feel...

I hear what you're saying...

What I hear you saying is...

It seems like you feel...

2. The feelings are usually the reason the person is approaching you. Sometimes it will not be certain what he or she is feeling, but he or she knows that it is causing them distress or anxiety.

Keys to naming feelings:

- Be precise.
- Do not back away from stating a feeling.
- Do not use minimizers or maximizers (For example, a little angry, kind of mad). People either have feelings or they don't.
- Trust your perceptions.
- Incorporate the word "feeling" before you state the feeling word. (For example, "It sounds like you are feeling angry".)

3. The source completes the empathetic response. Whatever the problem may be, some part of the problem is in the source of the feeling. Always focus on the person, not a third person. For example:

- It seems to me that you're feeling betrayed by your friend.
- It sounds like you're feeling confused about what to do next.
- You sound like you're feeling really angry about the situation with your mother.
- I'm hearing that you're feeling disappointed about the situation with your brother.

(Adapted from Ozone House, Inc. 2005)

LARA is a method of nonviolent dialogue developed by the organization Love Makes a Family that has been adopted by many activists and organizations as a way to engage in conversations around difficult topics. LARA provides a tool for responding to comments or questions, especially the hostile or threatening ones. This is an important technique for allies to know because there are certain risks to being an ally. Sometimes allying yourself with the LGBT community will lead to conflict or a negative response and it is important to know how to communicate through such situations.

LISTEN: This is where you use those empathetic listening skills to understand what beliefs and feelings lie at the core of the question or statement

AFFIRM: Express the connection that you found when you listened, whether it's a feeling, an experience, or a principal you have in common with the other person

RESPOND: We often hear debaters or politicians avoid answering the question that was asked in order to stay in control of the situation. In LARA, one answers the question and responds to the issues that the person rose. By doing this, one conveys that the other person's question deserves to be taken seriously.

ADD INFORMATION: Once the first three steps are completed, the opportunity to share additional information is open. This is a good time to state resources or to add a personal anecdote.

And/Or INQUIRE: As an alternative or complement to Adding Information, ask the other person for more information about their perspective. This demonstrates that you are genuinely interested in an exchange of information, not just working to win your point. It also is the most likely way to deepen dialogue, as it sets a tone for you both to inquire together.

LARA conversation example:

***Statement:** I think it would be fine for gay people to have civil unions, I just don't see why they have to call it marriage.*

***L:** Exasperation, maybe this person feels that he is being reasonable but others are unwilling to compromise.*

***A:** I'm glad you support civil unions. Those have been used in Vermont as an example of providing same-sex couples with some of the benefits of civil marriage.*

***R:** My concern is that if we have civil marriages and civil unions and the only difference is the sex of the people involved, then it will make it seem like the defining characteristic of marriage is that there is a man and a woman. To me, marriage at its core is a commitment between two people to stay together and take care of each other.*

***A:** Some people have suggested that we could call all state-performed ceremonies "civil unions" and leave the word "marriage" for religious ceremonies. What are your thoughts on that?*

***I:** Could you tell me more about why you support civil unions? . . . How did you come to that perspective? What is important about it to you?*