

Listening, understanding, and autonomy during life's important conversations

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Conversations, such as those between friends, colleagues, or teachers, at home with one's family, and even in pubs, stores, or public places, can help people share important thoughts and feelings, find common ground, and connect at a deeper level. But the paths that conversations take, and their outcomes for all involved, may depend on how listeners act, as well as on what is said. Listening is more than the passive process of keeping quiet; It involves actively conveying one's attention, understanding, and caring for the speaker or speakers. This may be especially important during personal and threatening disclosures, when speakers who share may feel (and be) vulnerable to judgment and rejection. In these cases, the openness, interest, and acceptance conveyed by high-quality listening may be a powerful interpersonal reaction. This talk integrates self-determination theory with the growing literature on high-quality interpersonal listening to explore these relational processes. It will explore the idea that high-quality listening is a specific and distinguishable autonomy-supportive strategy that satisfies basic psychological needs, reduces defensiveness, and promotes well-being and self-disclosure. I will present evidence from recent studies that manipulate high-quality listening in a number of ways with a consistent set of findings: that high-quality listening helps to satisfy the psychological needs of relatedness and autonomy. Among these, I present findings from an experimental study concerned with parent-adolescent communications, which manipulated parental listening when an actor-adolescent disclosed he had vaped (committed a transgression) or had been rejected for refusing to vape (and was feeling hurt). Adolescents who observed the parent engaging in high-quality listening anticipated their needs would be met in these conditions (when the adolescent disclosed both transgression and hurt), and that they would be more likely to disclose to the high-

quality listening parent). I also present findings from two experimental studies showing that discussing controversial topics such as one's prejudice and a disagreement satisfied needs to the extent that partners provide high-quality listening. I will explore implications for workplace disagreements, close relationship, and conversations among strangers.