

Validation: It's so much more than active listening

- “Validation is the recognition and acceptance of another person’s thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors as understandable”. - Karyn Hall, PhD
- Validation is to observe someone’s thought/feeling/behavior, understand them, and then honor/respect them as true, sane, or valid. A step further is to *nurture* them.
- Validation means to communicate to another, “I have just experienced you and I honor you” or “You’re worth my time, attention, and understanding”.

Common Synonyms or interchangeable terms: recognition, acknowledgment, confirmation, understanding, seen, known, felt, acceptance...

Validation Myths: Likely truths and common barriers

1. You have to agree with what the person is saying/doing.

- a. Truth: You can disagree with someone and still validate them. You have your own convictions, values, experiences, and responsibilities. Validation is making room for the other person’s convictions, values, etc.
- b. Barrier: If you are insecure or feel threatened by the other person’s position or how you experience them and moralistically judge/label the other person, validating may be hard for you.
- c. Barrier: This is especially hard when the speaker is talking about YOU. By validating them you may feel your voice/power is being challenged. Really, you are saying, “I can see where you’re coming from and I understand how my actions have affected you.” Later in the conversation you can express your side.

2. You can’t challenge or explore the person’s opinions, interpretation of the facts, or perceptions. You have to “just take it”.

- a. Truth: Context is king. There are times in conversations or in relationships where you balance the tension between listening to learn and understanding another person (using validation), and testing the accuracy or consistency of what the other person is saying. Validating is not about minimizing your own critical awareness or ability to discern truth/reality. You are encouraged to have boundaries while using validation in conversation.
- b. Barriers: Believing that you are not smart, weak, or somehow less than compared to the other person may cause you to forget your voice. Believing that the other person will get mad, walk away, or feel rejected by you may cause you to think you are responsible for their emotions. Fear of abandonment/rejection is also a barrier.

3. The other person has to know I’m validating them for it to “work” or be effective.

- a. Truth: Much of communication and relationship happens at the subconscious level below our cognitive awareness. The reason validation is so important is because it helps create a felt sense within the other person of, “I’m okay”. (Felt sense is partially about the way we experience ourselves in the presence of another person.) They may not think, “I was just accepted or validated” by you, but they may *feel* a shift (felt sense) toward peace, safety, or relief. They may never even

consciously acknowledge this felt sense but they will likely remember how they *felt* with you.

- b. Barriers: Some folks may continue to act defensively or show signs of distrust with you even while your intentions are pure. Past experiences will greatly affect this. Trust building takes time.

4. Believing that validation is a formula and once you use it in the equation of a conversation then the result will be connection, intimacy, or deeper vulnerability.

- a. Truth: Validation is more like a tool in your tool belt or a gesture of affection that helps you better experience another human being and them better experience you. You can do your best to build trust and work to be understood yourself, but how the other person *interprets* the gesture is not a variable you can control.
- b. Barriers: If the person you're listening to at some point says something along the lines of "you don't understand", it's important to move toward curiosity instead of defensiveness (ex, "But I've been validating you this whole time!") or hopelessness/helplessness (ex, "I don't know what else to do anymore"). Instead consider curiosity and invite their feedback, "My intentions are to understand you, is there something specific you want me to get/know?"

5. Validation is soft and a waste of time. What's the point of hearing their complaints/problems if I can't share advice/feedback or help them solve it?

- a. Truth: You are underestimating the power of being heard, seen, or understood. You may verbally be hearing "problem this, issue that", but at a deeper level there are times when as speakers we just want to not feel alone, weak, incompetent, crazy, or stupid. Sometimes the bigger heart longing from a speaker is, "I just want someone to understand me and hear it from my side". The visible (explicitly stated) problem may not be the primary issue. Sometimes the path of validation leads to the door of practical advice and solution-focused action.
- b. Barriers: Be aware if you believe your role is to fix, solve, or lead by taking over. In some cases, the trap here is that you are taking responsibility for a problem that's not yours, and disrespecting the speaker's ability to be creative in their own lives. Be aware if you are seeing the speaker as helpless/powerless and yourself as more able, more advanced, or superior. ***This is not to say to limit your strengths or be indirect/alooof when a speaker is asking for help/advice/solution***

6. I have to get the validation right the first time or magically be able to understand them when I'm really lost/confused.

- a. Truth: Validating is not a formula or a game show. It is a part of a process of communication; a gesture of kindness or respect. Questions are necessary when confused. In your "failed" attempts to understand you are inviting the speaker to bring more data to you. Failed attempts DO NOT mean you are a bad listener or they are a bad speaker. Respond kindly to your own insecurity and curiously invite more data from the speaker and try, try again to validate. (See reflection handout about clarification)
- b. Barriers: It's frustrating to hear "no" or "you're not listening!" or "I just said (this not that)". It can be defeating to see the speaker shut-down because you misunderstood them and you feel you missed an opportunity to connect. Get used to making mistakes and being awkward in this process. Your attempts and persistence mean more than you know. Focus on the value/goal you're trying to

reach. Focus on your tone of voice (gentle, kind, and patient). Focus on curiosity over defensiveness – “I didn’t mean to misunderstand, what did I miss?”

Validation is NOT...

- Making or interpreting meaning out of another person’s experience.
 - ◆ “You are in a season of....”
 - ◆ “When I went thru that I learned...”
- Minimizing or generalizing another’s experiences based on your own values, worldview, etc.
 - ◆ “You’re young, you have time....”
 - ◆ “As men/women, we just have to...”
 - ◆ “Yea, welcome to the club....”
- Repeating platitudes and cliches.
 - ◆ What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.
 - ◆ Everything happens for a reason.
 - ◆ Time heals all.
 - ◆ Just forget about it.
 - ◆ God has a plan.
 - ◆ This too shall pass.
- Redirecting someone’s expressed pain into hopefulness, gratitude, humor, or otherwise positive feelings.
 - ◆ “Well, at least you have...”
 - ◆ “But you’re so”
 - ◆ “You just got to remember...”
 - ◆ [joke to lighten *your* mood]
- Sharing your own memories or experiences related or similar to the Speaker’s content.
 - ◆ “That reminds me of a time...”
 - ◆ “I have a friend who went thru the same thing....”
- Suggesting action steps (this simplifies their problem and can communicate you’re the expert in their life)
 - ◆ “Have you prayed...”
 - ◆ “When I went thru that I did...”
 - ◆ “You just need to...”
 - ◆ “Have you considered...”

Signs in others that you are ‘good enough’ validating:

→ Sometimes speakers loop or repeat themselves 2, 3, 4 times in conversation or get louder; especially in conflict. This tends to happen because the person doesn’t feel understood, and they are trying to communicate something that they perceive is not being received by the listeners. **A sign that you are validating is that they stop repeating themselves** or saying the same thing in different words. Their need of being understood is met and they can move onto more content.

Pointer: Simply validate or reflect back (see reflection handout) what you’ve heard and DO NOT add your advice, defense, new information, or accuse/blame them of something. There will be another time in the conversation to express “your side” if necessary.

→ Some verbal cues and gestures that you might experience when you are effectively validating:

- Anything that signifies acceptance and alignment: “Yes”, “exactly”, “right”, etc.
- They nod their head up/down and look away, seeming to think or reflect further.
- They seem more relaxed.

→ The speaker shares more intimate or sensitive information. Essentially they feel safer/more trusting of you and can express more vulnerability.

→ They may physically get closer, touch, or lean towards you. (Depends of course on the kind of relationship.)

For additional resources go to www.makelevelpaths.org/resources

This handout in digital form

