

IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AMONG MARRIED COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

Indications from literature and observations from counseling point to the fact that most couples complain about ineffective listening. Often, as partners, we are not willing to create time and make effort to listen to one another. This most times leads to problems in relationships. This paper attempts to examine how listening skills counseling can help married couples improve communication to ascertain or reject its effectiveness. An experimental approach was adopted for the research study. A sample of 60 subjects were randomly selected and assigned to treatment and control groups with each group having 30 subjects each. An instrument titled "Couples' Communication Skills Inventory" (CCSI) of listening skills was administered to the subjects. A t-test technique was used to analyse the data collected at 0.05 level of significance. The result showed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. It revealed that the experimental group had a moderate level of rating in listening skills. Based on the finding, listening skills counseling was recommended for marriage enrichment programme.

Key words: Communication, Listening Skills.

Introduction

Communication can not occur without listening. Listening is one of the most important facets of communication and the life line of only relationship. In modern days, a person finds it necessary to get along smoothly with many different kinds of persons. A person is most likely to make others feel comfortable and make them want him around, if he is really interested in them and has necessary skills and willingness to discover what they expect from a relationship with him. The way to good interpersonal relationships is to enhance ones listening skill.

Effective listening is a way of showing the people in your personal relationships that they have your full attention and respect. It is also a way of showing that you are interested in them, in what they have to say and in keeping your relationship alive. Busby and Majors (1987) affirmed that "friends and loved ones are precious assets for securing good health and happiness. They undoubtedly deserve active instead of passive attempts to listen when they express themselves".

In a two way or dya-dic relationship, listening prompts more animated remarks such as um, hum, and encourages more interaction. It implies conscious

attention to sounds for the purpose of identification and understanding of meaning. To effectively listen, an individual must learn to possess patience, openness, develop listening qualities of eye contact, facial expressions, voice quality and a genuine fondness and respect for others. Practicing efficient listening is not easy. But it is possible. This paper attempts to examine how listening skills can improve communication among married couples.

Concept of Listening

The ability to communicate effectively is the most important talent that anyone can possess. Listening is a vital skill that everyone should be efficient in. it requires a focus attention and alertness to everything that is going on. Listening according to Nelson-Jones (1986) involves not only the act of receiving sounds but as much as possible, accurately understanding their meaning.

Pelt (2005) opined that listening involves discernment, observing non-verbals, caring, eye contact, watching for underlying motives, asking the right questions, giving appropriate responses and sometimes being silent. This definition summarizes

what listening is all about. It demands certain effort and time because it is not easy to become an effective listener.

Koehler and Koehler (1968) maintain that listening is a sharp attending to what is going on. Ahuja and Ahuja (2006) concurred that attentive listening includes listening to the whole person, gestures, words and feelings. Listening according to International Listening Association (ILA) 1995: 1).

Is the active process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. It involves the ability to retain information, as well as to react empathically and/or appreciatively to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.

Listening is an active process involving the construction, retention and reaction to meanings we assign to information. It requires our sustained attention and focus. Listening controls the flow of information by determining the amount of information that will filter in from what the speaker is saying.

Importance of Listening in Relationships

Listening is a vital skill in interpersonal relationship. In daily life interaction, listening brings closeness, reflects love, acceptance and understanding. Listening enables a partner in a relationship according to Wright (2001) to understand, enjoy, learn something and give help or comfort to the other person.

Lar, Okpede and Bulus (1992) maintained that listening facilitate understanding in interpersonal relationship in that:

- a. It takes the burden off the partner by allowing free expression of thoughts, and feelings.
- b. It is an efficient way to get through to hidden and real meanings behind words by offering well timed moments to confront and clear different perceptions that encourage partners to assume responsibility.
- c. It recognizes that emotions are related to specific situations such as boredom, anger, sadness, etc.

- d. It ask appropriate questions as an open invitation to the other partner to talk or self-disclose.

Di Batista (1997) concurred that listening helps us build and maintain relationships and even help us determine whether the person we are talking to is being deceitful. It is recognized as an essential skill for effective interpersonal relationship.

Statement of Problem

Ineffective listening causes serious problems in our personal lives as well as our relationships. Married couples often complain about their spouses "not listening to me". Others report that their partners do not listen at all. Some times our minds wander-off that we do not listen to whatever is said around us. At other times, partners select what they want to hear and are unwilling to create time and effort to listen or pay attention to what a spouse is saying. As a result, couples yell out "when will you ever listen? Poor listening is the failure to understand the listening process. Most partners do not know what to listen for when they engage in spoken messages. Listening is a difficult process because what is heard must be weighed, analyzed, sorted, related, classified, evaluated and Judged (Anilla, (1963). These attended problems motivated this research study to determine the efficacy of listening skills counseling in improving communication among married couples.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to determine the influence of listening skills on communication of married couples. The related research question states that:

Does exposure to listening skills counseling improve the communication between married couples?

The research hypothesis states that:

There is no significant difference in the level of communication between married couples expose to listening skills treatment and those in control group.

Methodology and Procedure

Research Design

This study is an experimental research that adopted a post-test only control group design to obtain data for

analysis. According to Kolo (2003) the design is graphically represented as follows:

R x O₁

R O₂

R represent random assignment of subjects to groups either as experimental or control groups, thereby making the subjects equivalent.

X represent treatment for the experimental group

O represent post-test which involves the administration of the instrument for data collection.

In this design, the researcher can form more than two groups, if the treatments are more than one. Randomization is emphasis, because it qualifies the design to be a true experimental design. Moreso, there is no pre-testing of subjects before treatment. It also controls for most of the threats to internal validity, as such, it is a powerful design. It provides confidentiality of the subjects because there is no pre-testing. In addition, it eliminates pre-test sensitization of the subjects. The design allows for a between group study.

Population of the Study

The population of the study were all married couples in subsistence relationship residing in SABON-GARI TOWN OF KADUNA STATE. The population of the study were literate with a minimum of primary education during the period of study. The total population for the study was 3,187 of Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) denomination.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample of this study were male and female married couples in subsistence relationship who were selected numbering about 60 subjects from a population of 3,187. The sampling technique adopted was randomization. The design of the study required random assignment of subjects to groups. Therefore, the subjects were randomly assigned to two groups, each group had 30 subjects in it. The groups were

titled experimental and control groups. This technique made the subjects equivalent.

Research Instrument

The instrument for data collection was titled "Couples Communication Skills Inventory (CCSI) of Listening Skills. The instrument had two parts as follows: part A was biodata section and part B was listening skills items numbering 28 Acheck list of strongly agreed (4), agreed (3), disagreed (2), and strongly disagreed (1) which made a four point-likert scale for rating.

Validity of the Instrument

A pilot-test of the instrument on listening skills was conducted. A reliability coefficient of 0.882 and internal consistency obtained for items was 0.911.

Administration of Instrument

Administration of the instrument was conducted in two parts. The first part consisted of counseling treatment on listening skills to subjects in experimental group for six weeks consecutively. The control group received no treatment at this stage except a placebo. The second part was the administration of couples' communication skills inventory questionnaire to both the experimental and control groups. That is, all 60 subjects were administered a post-test and responses were coded and analysed.

Data Analysis

The data collected was statistically analysed using two-tail t-test. The hypothesis stated for the study, required comparism between scores of experimental group and control group so as to test for any difference.

Results

The hypothesis of the study states that, there is no significant difference in the level of communication between married couples exposed to treatment and those in control group. The result is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Two-tail t-test on effect of listening skills communication of experimental and control groups

Status	N	Mean	SD	t	df	P
Experimental group (listening skills)	30	61.7667	6.80103	5.107	58	0.000
Control group	30	68.9516	8.30498			

Critical at 1.98

A look at Table 1 revealed that subjects exposed to treatment (experiment) had a mean score of 61.7667 and SD = 6.80103 which is lower than that of control group. The control group had a mean score of 68.9516 and SD = 8.30498 which is higher than the treatment group.

The t calculated value of 5.107 is significantly higher than the critical value of 1.98 at 58 degree of freedom (df). The level of significance 0.000 which is less than 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the level of communication of subjects exposed to treatment (experiment) and those in control group is rejected. Thus, the null hypothesis is not accepted.

Discussion of Finding

The finding of the tested hypothesis showed a statistical significant difference between married couples exposed to listening skills counseling and those in control group. The result therefore indicates that subjects in experimental group had a lower score than those in control group. This result reveals that couples' level of communication is average or moderate as a result of the counseling teaching received on listening skills, such that subjects rated themselves based on the teaching given to them on how to listen using eye contact, observing facial expression, bodily movement, body language, paying attention to words, feelings, tone of voice, etc. A possible explanation might be attributed to the fact that couples learnt and acquire a variety of listening skills technique which they did not have and are making use of them.

The control group on the other hand, got no teaching, thus might have rated themselves higher. A possible explanation could be that Nigerians like to hide their problems and present pseudo front of bliss. Furthermore, it is possible that couples in control group might lack knowledge on listening skills as it is not taught in school and so could not understand their meanings, (Qubein, 1996). This was concurred by Holmes (2004), Pelt (2005), Ahuja (2006) that listening is difficult.

The counseling treatment given might have expose couples to acquire new listening skills that improve

their communication. Ahuja (2006) reports that the need for listening is being recognized. Married couples exposed to treatment on listening skills might have learn that the skill of listening is based on choosing to get into the internal frame of reference of whoever you are communicating with.

Implication of Finding

The finding of this study revealed an average or a moderate level of communication improvement on listening skills counseling of married couples. It therefore implied that, effective listening skills could be learnt and put to use by married couples. This shows that married couples could be counseled on listening skills treatment programme to improve their communication. Would be couples could also be counselled to enable them listen efficiently to their partner's communication and respond appropriately. Furthermore, counselors could work with married couples who encounter communication problems of listening to improve themselves thereby enriching their relationship. Pelt (2005) maintains that when new habit patterns become part of our life, change takes place to enrich our relationship.

Lastly, married couples should learn to communicate at all times and work together to enhance their relationships. It is important also, to establish a non-threatening communication situation thereby creating an atmosphere in which partners feel accepted, respected, loved, desired and welcome at all times.

Recommendations

To get the best from our partners, couples must practice active listening and demonstrate receptivity. Efficient listening can be an effective and inexpensive therapy for a host of human problems and needs. The following listening techniques when observed can improve listening according to Ahuja (2006), Oberg (2003), Pelt (2005) and Santrock (2004). Effective listening can be improved when spouses:

- Observe the speaker's eyes, facial expressions, posture and gestures for communication. Many messages are sent non-verbally.

- Pay careful attention to the person who is talking. This will show that you are interested in what is being said.
- Maintain good eye contact and lean forward slightly when another person is speaking to you.
- Encourage talking by making vocal sounds such as, umh, hum, you mean it, etc.
- Stay focus on what is being said. If you feel your mind wandering, change the position of your body and try to concentrate on the speaker's words.
- Let yourself finish listening before you begin to speak. You can not listen if you are thinking about what you want to say next.
- Ask questions. If you are not sure you understand what the speaker said, just ask. It is good to paraphrase in your own words what the speaker said so that you can be sure that your understanding is correct.
- Give feedback in a competent manner. Sit up straight and look directly at the speaker. Nod to show that you understand. At appropriate points you may smile, frown, laugh or be silent. These are ways to let the speaker know that you are really listening. Note that you listen with your face as well as with your ears.

Conclusion

Listening is critical in making and keeping relationships. Therefore, married couples need learn and make commitment to improve their listening skills. By this way they maintain their relationships. No single individual have successfully master all tools of communication skills, but efforts toward improvement could be made. Efficiency in listening is possible with practice.

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