



Filling Your Cup: Compassionate Listening During the Holidays
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As the final months of the year approach, the nights are longer, our patient lists expand exponentially, and the phone calls never stop. Everyone is coughing, febrile, and congested. Our children's sporting events are never-ending. With our work and family responsibilities weighing on us, we then have the holiday season to manage. The holidays bring us a unique set of challenges.

Personally, I have a few tricks in my bag that help me during these times. First and foremost, because we will be gathering with many folks who are near and mostly dear. We have multiple opportunities in the forms of parties, dinners, and holiday concerts. One practice I hold very highly during these gatherings is compassionate listening. The great Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh describes compassionate listening as, “You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her empty his (her) heart.” When we meet family members or friends after an extended interval of time, topics of conversation may vary. Essentially, people are really looking to be heard.

Though we are connected by genetics or bonds of friendship, we all have our experiences and the accompanying feelings. Many conflicts arise because we identify with those feelings, and they can fall into anger, disappointment, guilt. As the saying goes, misery loves company. Compassionate listening allows someone to have a safe space to express oneself, free of any judgement. Sometimes, we tend to either want to fix the other person’s challenges or commiserate. Listening to someone’s hardships reminds us of our own difficulties.

In our careers, much of our time is spent listening to our patients and their caregivers with compassion. We offer them some suggestions, comfort, and hope. As we devote so much time and energy in our day-to-day duties at work, the capacity to share this same energy with our loved ones can be limited. Then, during the holidays, we have more loved ones and longer time intervals with them. One helpful tool is having true empathy. This is putting ourselves in someone else’s experience, to have a better understanding of what they are feeling. We must release any perception and opinion.

When we listen compassionately, we allow someone to be authentic and vulnerable. We also find our true purpose, which is sharing love and kindness. As our family members make comments that are insulting or express polarizing political views, we must remember to remove our judgement. When we do not attach a label to something, we just listen and possibly understand. Only then, can we remember our connectedness instead of keeping the distance that separates.