Minimal Encouragers

Minimal encouragers are small signals that let the speaker know you are listening and understanding – words like “uh-huh”, “yes”, “no”, “mmm”, and little actions like nodding that show you are engaged in listening.

They encourage the speaker to talk, with minimum interruption or influence by the listener. Once the speaker begins to talk, the listener uses well-placed encouragers that are unobtrusive enough to not interrupt the speaker’s thoughts, but which encourage them to reveal more.

Minimal encouragers such as nods, non-words like “mmm”, and “yes” & “no” are usually used while the person is speaking, with words and short phrases being used in-between:

Client: “I feel like it’s all getting on top of me …

Listener: yes

Client: … but I don’t know what to do about it. It’s like it’s full on.

Listener: - *<pause>* full on

Client: Yes, non-stop, but I’m entitled to a break too …

Listener: Hmmmmm

Client: … and I want them to acknowledge that.”

Have you ever had the experience of someone who used such encouragers inappropriately? Maybe they were saying “yes” when it would be more appropriate to say “no”. Maybe they were interjecting with “mms” or “uh-huhs” where it didn’t make sense or may not have been an appropriate reaction. Perhaps it was a busy parent, too distracted to listen properly to what their child was saying. Perhaps it was a shop assistant who seemed to have decided what you wanted before you had a chance to tell them.

Overusing encouragers or putting encouragers in inappropriate places gives the impression of just pretending to be listening. As you practice this skill you will become increasingly comfortable with trusting yourself to know what feels natural and helpful to the process, and what does not feel natural or helpful.

Using minimal encouragers is a skill that requires you to listen actively and give your full attention. Too few encouragers, or using them formulaically – dropping them in without regard to what the person is really saying – is likely to discourage talking and give the impression of not listening or not caring. Using them appropriately is likely to encourage talking and help the other person feel they are being listened to, heard and understood.

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