Thomas Gordon's 12 Roadblocks to Listening

Loving habits that can close the door on connection

When someone we care about is hurting, we want to help. So we jump in: we fix, we reassure, we explain, we steer. Psychologist Dr. Thomas Gordon identified twelve common responses that, however good the intention, tend to stop the other person from going deeper. Without meaning to, they send the message that the person's feelings need to be managed or hurried along.

All of us use these. Many are simply how we were spoken to growing up, and most come from a part of us that wants to help or wants the discomfort to end. When you catch yourself in one, treat it as an invitation to slow down and listen again.

The Twelve Roadblocks

1. Ordering and Directing

Sounds like: "Stop crying." "You need to call her right now."

Being told what to do can leave a person feeling small, as if their feelings were a problem to be handled. It often sparks resistance where you hoped for openness.

2. Warning and Threatening

Sounds like: "If you keep this up, you'll lose your job." "You'd better calm down."

Warnings bring fear into the room. The other person starts protecting themselves, and someone busy protecting has little room left to share.

3. Moralizing and Preaching

Sounds like: "You should be grateful." "A good parent wouldn't feel that way."

"Shoulds" pile guilt on top of whatever the person is already carrying. Over time they may stop sharing to avoid being judged.

4. Advising and Offering Solutions

Sounds like: "Why don't you just..." "What I would do is..."

Advice comes from caring, and it can land as "you can't figure this out yourself." Most people need to feel heard before they are ready for solutions, and many find their own answers once they are. If you have an idea, ask first: "Would you like ideas, or would you like me to listen?"

5. Persuading with Logic and Lecturing

Sounds like: "Let's look at the facts." "You're overreacting, and here's why."

Feelings don't follow logic, and arguing with them usually makes them dig in. Facts can wait until the person feels understood.

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6. Judging, Criticizing and Blaming

Sounds like: "Well, that wasn't very smart." "This is your own fault."

Judgment is one of the fastest ways to end a conversation. Even a small dose teaches the other person that honesty with you isn't safe.

7. Praising and Agreeing

Sounds like: "You're so smart, you'll figure it out." "You're absolutely right, she's terrible."

This one surprises people. Praise in the middle of someone's pain can skip right over what they are going through, and quick agreement can feed the story without helping them sort through it. Warm appreciation has its place; let it come after they feel heard.

8. Name-Calling, Ridiculing and Shaming

Sounds like: "Don't be such a baby." "Okay, drama queen."

Even meant as a joke, a label stings. Shame drives feelings underground, where they tend to grow.

9. Interpreting and Analyzing

Sounds like: "You're only saying that because you're tired." "This is about your father."

Telling someone why they feel what they feel makes you the expert on their inner life. Even when your insight is accurate, it can feel intrusive. Leave room for them to discover it. "What do you make of it?" opens that door.

10. Reassuring, Sympathizing and Consoling

Sounds like: "Don't worry, it'll all work out." "Everyone goes through that."

Reassurance is offered with love, and it can also tell the person their feelings are too much or should be over soon. Staying beside them in the hard place often comforts more than any reassurance can.

11. Questioning and Probing

Sounds like: "Why did you do that?" "What exactly did he say? And then what?"

A string of questions can turn a conversation into an interrogation and steer it toward what you want to know. "Why" questions in particular can feel like accusations. A single gentle invitation, such as "Tell me more," keeps the lead with them.

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12. Withdrawing, Distracting and Changing the Subject

Sounds like: "Let's not talk about this now." "Hey, did you see the game?" Joking it away.

When feelings make us uncomfortable, steering away is tempting. To the other person, it can feel like their feelings were too much for you.

What Helps Instead

Gordon's answer to the roadblocks is what he called active listening: giving someone your full attention and reflecting back what you hear, both the words and the feeling underneath them.

- Slow down and give them your full attention. Put the phone away.
- Reflect what you hear: "It sounds like you're so discouraged."
- Gently name the feeling you sense, and welcome their correction if you missed.
- Let silence do some of the work. People often go deeper when they aren't rushed.
- Ask before helping: "Do you want ideas, or do you want me to listen?"

Most of the time, the most helpful thing you can offer is your presence. When people feel heard, they often find their own way through. For more, see the Effective Communication Guidelines handout.

Credit

The twelve roadblocks and active listening come from the work of Dr. Thomas Gordon, first published in Parent Effectiveness Training (1970). The descriptions and examples here are my own.

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