

7 Cups of Tea

New Listener Training

Summary of Discussions

This document summarizes some discussions that took place in March and April 2016 about how to improve training for new listeners in order to improve listener quality. The discussions were open-ended and they drew out many ideas and opinions.

Abstract

Discussions about improving the training for new listeners revealed significant lack of agreement on a variety of issues, including whether the training should be easier or harder, how it should be followed up, the meaning of terms like advice, professionalism and referral, and even the meaning of being a listener.

However, there was widespread support for more clarity about advice and referral, and some support for making the training longer and more difficult with better testing.

Context

Ideas for improving new listener training in order to improve listener quality have arisen on many occasions. There have been some formally submitted suggestions about improving the training. In a forum post in March, @Anomalia summarized these ideas and asked for further opinions. There was a survey and a forum discussion, followed up by four hour-long chatroom discussions, which @Anomalia led. This document is a summary by @RarelyCharlie drawing on text from all these sources.

More than 120 people contributed to the discussions. (A few of these may have been included in the count by mistake after visiting the forum or a chatroom for a different purpose, and a few may have been counted twice with different user names.)

		<i>Listeners</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Anonymous</i>
Suggestions		–	–	22
Forum thread	March 27 – April 27	11	1	–
Survey	March 27 – April 26	7	0	11
Adult Listeners Chat	April 4	32	–	–
Adult Listeners Chat	April 7	35	–	–
Adult Members Chat	April 11	6	10	–
Teen Listeners Chat	April 26	9	–	–
Total:		* 83	11	33

* Some listeners took part more than once

Results

All the discussions ranged widely, not always sticking closely to the topic of training for new listeners. On most of the issues that were mentioned by more than one person there was some disagreement.

Seven listeners said in the survey they would be interested in helping to update the training.

The need for change

Most people accepted the premise that new listener training can be improved, but there wasn't strong criticism of the current training.

Some members said listeners already do a good job, and a listener said the current training works. But others suggested that people sometimes become listeners for the wrong reasons, and that the training should weed out those who are not serious about it.

In contrast, one opinion was that online training doesn't work at all, and another idea was that listening cannot be taught, so that it would be better to select listeners who have natural ability and filter out the rest. However, these opinions were not common.

Several people thought that the training is too easy and quick:

"I don't think I can talk to someone with just this training I've received"

But not everyone agreed:

"It sounds like 7 Cups is trying to weed out the pretenders, but may unintentionally bore the contenders."

A listener pointed out that most people who complete the training don't remain listeners for long.

The training format

At times there may have been some confusion in the discussions between the training for new listeners and the other training guides available to listeners.

The multiple choice questions used in the training were criticized for making it too easy to guess the answers. Some people thought the main purpose of the questions is to reinforce knowledge, so it doesn't matter if they're easy, but others thought the main purpose is to test new listeners and ensure that baddies don't make it through the training.

The idea of delaying the training if you get a question wrong was floated, but several people disagreed with it. The idea of making it compulsory to watch the videos was also floated, again without getting much support.

One listener thought the videos in the training were good, but others disagreed.

Some people thought the training in active listening should be separate from the training in using the 7 Cups environment, but not everyone agreed.

Extending the training

Several people thought the initial training should be extended by requiring one or more mock chats before a new listener can take any requests. Some people thought these mock chats should be with a mentor. Others thought something like the current verification system or the active listening training modules would work.

There was some recognition that, with up to 200 new listeners a day signing up, requiring them all to do mock chats could be impractical:

"...too many mock chats needed and too few people to do the mockery I think..."

Some people thought that mock chats could be automated, but others thought this would not be good enough.

Professionalism

Some people thought that the current training does not explain professionalism well, and that the training should include examples of what professionalism means. One or two people said they thought good English is important.

Some people wanted listeners to have specific insight into mental illnesses or other topics, particularly personality disorders, or other specific knowledge of psychology, like human development or motivation.

Others thought that listeners should not try to act professional at all. They should not just copy standard responses:

"it seems like you feel sad"

Instead, they should connect with people on a more personal and emotional level. Some members used the term genuineness to describe this human connection, but some thought that it could not be taught.

"Sometimes, in the depths of despair, what is needed is a genuine human connection. So a robotic 'How does that make you feel?' may be a lot less beneficial..."

Empathy

Empathy was mentioned a few times. One listener reported having learned that empathy is the key to listening, but some people thought listeners don't all know what empathy means, and that they sometimes relate to members with sympathy or in terms of their own problems.

Response time

Response time was mentioned several times, and someone asked for the rule about taking a maximum of three chats at a time to be explained in the training.

Several people said that the training should explain how to use the status settings.

Referrals and resources

There was some confusion in the discussion between referring someone to another listener and referring someone to an external resource. Many people thought that referrals were not explained to listeners well enough.

"I just use the REFER button"

"There's a refer button!?!?!?"

Several people thought that listeners sometimes don't refer when they should, and sometimes do refer when they shouldn't. Some people said that how to get help with a chat needs to be explained better.

Several listeners mentioned that it's difficult to find external links to give to people who are suicidal.

Helpfulness and advice

Some people thought that the training does not explain helpfulness well. Several listeners thought that other listeners sometimes try to cheer people up, judge them, advise them or diagnose them instead of really listening.

It was agreed that listeners are often asked for advice, and some people come to 7 Cups expecting advice, so listeners should be trained in how to handle this. A listener remarked that the advice about advice in the forums is confusing. A member remarked that some listeners seemed hard to connect with, and that this might be because they didn't want to give advice:

"listeners can be very elusive and vague"

Some people thought that new listeners should only take requests about limited subject areas they know something about, and some members wanted more details about listeners so they could choose the right listener.

Another view was that the helper mindset and the listener mindset are different, though someone pointed out that listeners are rated on helpfulness.

"I wish I had learned how much of a struggle it could be to listen to someone and not be able to physically help them."

Support for listeners

Several people felt that listeners don't know about the listener chatrooms, or don't use them enough. One idea was to make attending a discussion compulsory before a

new listener can take chats, but another view was that taking part in a discussion or asking for help can be scary, and that new listeners are often ignored and rejected in the rooms.

Some listeners thought the training should cover self care and avoiding burnout. One said that some listeners take very large numbers of chats.

It was remarked that finding listener resources on the site was difficult. Several people thought the training should cover how to navigate the site, and it should explain the full range of resources and support available to listeners.

Site design

Some problems that people experience with the design of the site were mentioned. They included:

- finding resources for listeners
- navigating the forums
- using the app
- lack of a glossary
- lack of indication in profiles when a listener is not active at present
- support scheduling of listener availability

Things listeners find difficult

Many other things that listeners find difficult or get wrong were mentioned, both by listeners and members. Here's a selection:

- blocking and banning
- listeners getting too intimate or asking for personal details
- how to greet a member or guest
- what to do when members ask you personal questions
- how to handle flirting during chats
- requests for social network handles or phone numbers
- reducing the number of personal requests
- inappropriate chats, difficult people, bullies and trolls
- confidentiality
- knowing all the rules and policies

Miscellaneous ideas

Many ideas not directly related to new listener training were mentioned.

One of these ideas was to make the active listening tests compulsory (though not part of the initial training, which is a separate idea). Not everyone agreed.

Another idea was that the new listener training should be seen as only the starting point of a journey, and our focus should be on fostering growth or increasing knowledge following the initial training, not on making the initial training harder.

"I am not sure if tests or mock chats or the training things we have are holistic enough to grow listeners fully"

Here's a selection of other ideas:

- empower members to report listeners
- require periodic listener reviews
- require all listeners to become verified after a time
- involve experienced members more in the listener community
- allow experienced listeners to support other listeners more
- allow more listeners to become mentors (but don't make it too easy)
- provide training podcasts
- verify every listener's real age