How To Handle “Predatory Listening”

Oren Jay Sofer

It felt like stepping on the wrong end of a rake.

My relative had asked for my opinion, but when I gave it, he launched into what sounded like a well-rehearsed argument, taking issue with each thing I had said and critiquing my character. I felt like I’d walked into a trap.

Perhaps you’ve had this experience? You’re in a conversation, and it seems like the other person has been waiting for the slightest thing to jump on, to prove you wrong, preach their view, or assert a preconceived idea.

Or maybe you’ve been “that person” yourself. I certainly have. If I’m angry, upset, or in emotional pain, I can feel the temptation to listen with a hypercritical focus rather than with curiosity. If I don’t pay attention, my mind switches into offense mode, poised to build a case, selecting only things that validate my narrative.

This phenomenon is known as “predatory listening,” and in today’s charged, fractured discourse it’s become all too common—on the left, right, and everywhere in between. Predatory listening can take a variety of forms: listening with a narrow focus to find fault or confront someone; lying in wait for something to be offended by; deliberately trying to catch someone out; or listening only to gather evidence for a rebuttal.

The costs of this way of relating can be high. I’ve seen it tear families apart and turn activist spaces into circular firing squads. And it doesn’t matter whether it comes from the left or the right. Whether it’s conspiracy theories, dogmatism, or self-righteousness, the dynamics are the same: a mixture of mental fixation and emotional volatility, the intense inner pressure to assert views confrontationally, and the deep yearning to be right. The needs of the ‘listener’ overshadow relational values like understanding, connection, healing, or mutuality. No one wins.

So how can we better handle this behavior when it comes up?

First, when I notice this tendency coming up in myself, it takes a lot of mindfulness and restraint to bear with the discomfort of the inner pressure to speak without acting on it. But if I can pause for long enough to consider my purpose, things begin to shift. What am I actually aiming for? Do I want this person to consider another point of view? To change their behavior? If what I’m looking for is any kind of understanding or transformation, shifting out of the offensive mode of predation and into curiosity and connection will generally serve better.

When predatory listening seems to be coming up in others, I suggest the following strategies.

The first thing to note is that demonizing this behavior or calling it out won’t solve the problem. You can’t fight predatory listening with more arguing. It’s like throwing gasoline on a fire—it’ll just burn more furiously.

So, to get around this way of relating we need to step outside of the game of who’s right and wrong, and turn toward what’s happening on a human level.

Many world traditions and psychological models teach that all human behavior can be traced back to deeper, universal longings rooted in goodness. What if underneath that vitriol is a beautiful value, or a tender place of vulnerability—even one outside of the person’s own awareness? For example, it could be a need to be seen, or a longing to know that we matter and have a voice. It could be a strong commitment to truthfulness, justice, community or family. It could even be the painful scars of emotional wounds, personal or collective, crying out for empathy.

So, instead of arguing, invite the other person to share more. If what they really need is to express themselves and feel heard, give them an opportunity to do so (as long as it's not harming you or another). Listen for what matters to them. What does this person care about? Where is their passion? Affirm any positive intention, value or need you can hear in what they say.

You might even ask them directly what they want. I might say something like, "I get the sense that you've thought a lot about this and have some very clear views. What is it you'd like me to know or understand? Do you have a sense of what you'd like right now?" Or, "What can I do that would help right now?" Sometimes, a direct, honest question can shatter the pretense of debate, reveal what's happening, and either end the conversation or open space for new possibilities.

Of course, it requires mindfulness, strength and presence to resist the temptation to jump into the fray, tear the other person's argument apart, or point out how damaging their approach may be. And again, if their speech is harmful, you may need to remove yourself from the situation. Above all else, if you're on the receiving end of this kind of behavior, try not to take it personally. Do what you need to take care of yourself, and remember that making an enemy out of the other person does nothing to help, and actively harms your own heart.