

WHYZMEN • GO DEEPER • SESSION 10 • SHORT READ, 7 MIN

Making Another Person Feel Seen

Seven guidelines from Allison Pugh's research on connective labor

“You are the God who sees me.”

— **Genesis 16:13**

How to use this reading

This is a recommended **Go Deeper** reading for **Session 10: The Fellowship Gap & Finding Your Circle**. It sits beside the Listening Kit and the Marriage Listening Card. The Kit gives you the tools; this reading gives you the reason they work.

Read it once straight through. Then pick **one** of the seven guidelines and practice it for a week: with your wife, in your triad, with a friend over coffee. Come back for the next one when the first feels natural.

ABOUT THE SOURCE

Based on the work of **Dr. Allison Pugh**, sociologist at Johns Hopkins University and author of *The Last Human Job: The Work of Connecting in a Disconnected World* (2024), as discussed on the *Hidden Brain* podcast with Shankar Vedantam.

Pugh spent years watching people whose jobs depend on connection: chaplains, nurses, teachers, therapists, detectives, salesmen. She found they all do the same underlying work. She calls it **connective labor: seeing another person, and that person feeling seen**.

Most of us get it wrong not by being cruel but by being in a hurry. The good news is that it can be learned, and it is the one job that never retires.

Why It Matters

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- **People who feel seen take advice; people who don't, won't.** Pugh's own doctor told her to eat fewer cookies without learning she had rowed crew for thirty years. The advice went nowhere.
- **Relationship beats expertise.** Across 355,000 students, the teacher-student bond mattered more than any curriculum change. In medical trials, a doctor who makes eye contact and doesn't interrupt improved health outcomes more than a daily aspirin.
- **Listening is what people need.** A pediatrician told Pugh the mothers in her practice "don't need me. They need an hour with a good listener." That is what your brother needs from you, too.
- **It works both ways.** Pugh's nurses and chaplains said seeing someone in his worst moment gave dignity to *both* of them. This is not soft work. Detectives and negotiators run on it.

Seven Guidelines for Men

1

Slow down before you walk in.

Hurry is the enemy of seeing. Pugh had to teach herself to pause and ask, "*Who is this person I'm blowing past?*"

You now have the margin. Use it. Put the phone away, turn your body toward him or her, and let the clock go.

2

Pass the ball.

Pugh's picture is a soccer ball: airtime is the ball, and whoever has it controls the field. If you hold it, telling your story or offering your fix, he has no room to put himself in the game.

Ask a question, then give him or her the ball and keep your foot off it.

3

Drop your first interpretation.

You will decide what his problem is within thirty seconds. Hold it loosely. He may say, *“No, it’s more like this.”*

When he corrects you, say, *“Now I get it,”* and mean it. Pugh found that being corrected and taking it well makes a man feel more seen, not less.

4

Name what he didn’t say.

This is the master move. Listen for the feeling underneath the words and say it out loud: *“Sounds like that stung.” “Sounds like you’re proud of that.” “Sounds like you’re not sure you can pull it off.”*

It does not have to be a negative feeling. When you name what he left unspoken, he feels known, and it becomes safe for him or her to say more.

5

Let him or her be angry, sad, or afraid without fixing it.

A hospital chaplain in Pugh’s research met a man so furious at being put on a ventilator he could not speak. She handed him a tissue box and told him to throw it at the wall. Days later he told her: there is nothing like the worst moment of your life and feeling that someone understands.

Permission is worth more than a solution.

6

When you get it wrong, go back.

A therapist noticed a client leave a session “off,” called her, and said, *“I think I missed something. The session felt different.”* That call was what the client later said healed her: you noticed.

Missing a man is not the end of seeing him. Noticing that you missed him or her, and returning, is the deepest seeing there is. Most long marriages run on this, not on never getting it wrong.

7

Your nods are not manners; they are the mechanism.

In a Finnish lab study, when a listener nodded, kept eye contact, and made small sounds of understanding, the storyteller's stress measurably dropped, and moved onto the listener.

That is why real listening tires you out. It is labor. Do it anyway; the load is meant to be shared.

The Test

ONE QUESTION AT THE END OF EVERY CONVERSATION

Did he leave feeling seen?

Not helped. Not advised. **Seen.**

Pugh's interview subjects told her, unprompted, that being listened to that way felt "therapeutic, almost." Nobody was treating them. Someone was paying attention.

Pugh compares connective labor to engine grease: invisible when it's there, unmistakable when it's missing. A triad, a marriage, a church: each one runs on it.

You already know how to do this. You did it for forty years at work and called it something else. **Now do it on purpose.**

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

— James 1:19

Try It This Week

Fill these in after a real conversation. Bring one to your triad.

1. The guideline I am practicing this week:

2. A moment I passed the ball, or named what he didn't say. What happened?

3. A moment I missed someone. Did I go back?

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