

Become a Better Listener: Active Listening

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Most people go through their daily lives engaging in many conversations with friends, co-workers, and our family members. But most of the time, we don't listen as well as we could or sometimes should. We're often distracted by other things in the environment, such as the television, the Internet, our cell phones, or something else. We think we're listening to the other person, but we're really not giving them our full attention.

Enter a skill called "active listening." Active listening is all about building rapport, understanding, and trust. By learning the skills below, you will become a better listener and actually hear what the other person is saying, not just what you think they are saying or what you want to hear. While therapists are often made fun of for engaging in active listening, it is a proven technique that helps people talk and feel free to continue talking even if the person they are talking to doesn't have a lot to offer the other person (other than their ear).

Are you as good a listener as you think you are?

13 Steps to Better Active Listening Skills

Below you will find 13 different skills that help people be better active listeners. You do not have to become adept at each of these skills to be a good active listener, but the more you do, the better you'll be. If you even just use 3 or 4 of these skills, you will find yourself listening and hearing more of what another person is saying to you.

1. Restating

To show you are listening, repeat every so often what you think the person said — not by parroting, but by paraphrasing what you heard in your own words. For example, "Let's see if I'm clear about this. . ."

2. Summarizing

Bring together the facts and pieces of the problem to check understanding — for example, "So it sounds to me as if . . ." Or, "Is that it?"

3. Minimal encouragers

Use brief, positive prompts to keep the conversation going and show you are listening — for example, "umm-hmmm," "Oh?" "I understand," "Then?" "And?"

4. Reflecting

Instead of just repeating, reflect the speaker's words in terms of feelings — for example, "This seems really important to you. . ."

5. Giving feedback

Let the person know what your initial thoughts are on the situation. Share pertinent information, observations, insights, and experiences. Then listen carefully to confirm.

6. Emotion labeling

Putting feelings into words will often help a person to see things more objectively. To help the person begin, use “door openers” — for example, “I’m sensing that you’re feeling frustrated. . . worried. . . anxious. . .”

7. Probing

Ask questions to draw the person out and get deeper and more meaningful information — for example, “What do you think would happen if you. . .?”

8. Validation

Acknowledge the individual’s problems, issues, and feelings. Listen openly and with empathy, and respond in an interested way — for example, “I appreciate your willingness to talk about such a difficult issue. . .”

9. Effective pause

Deliberately pause at key points for emphasis. This will tell the person you are saying something that is very important to them.

10. Silence

Allow for comfortable silences to slow down the exchange. Give a person time to think as well as talk. Silence can also be very helpful in diffusing an unproductive interaction.

11. “I” messages

By using “I” in your statements, you focus on the problem not the person. An I-message lets the person know what you feel and why — for example, “I know you have a lot to say, but I need to. . .”

12. Redirecting

If someone is showing signs of being overly aggressive, agitated, or angry, this is the time to shift the discussion to another topic.

13. Consequences

Part of the feedback may involve talking about the possible consequences of inaction. Take your cues from what the person is saying — for example, “What happened the last time you stopped taking the medicine your doctor prescribed?”

7 Communication Blockers

These roadblocks to communication can stop communication dead in its tracks:

1. “Why” questions. They tend to make people defensive.
2. Quick reassurance, saying things like, “Don’t worry about that.”
3. Advising — “I think the best thing for you is to move to assisted living.”
4. Digging for information and forcing someone to talk about something they would rather not talk about.
5. Patronizing — “You poor thing, I know just how you feel.”
6. Preaching — “You should. . .” Or, “You shouldn’t. . .”
7. Interrupting — Shows you aren’t interested in what someone is saying.

5 Simple Conversation Courtesies

1. “Excuse me...”
2. “Pardon me....”
3. “One moment please...”
4. “Let’s talk about solutions.”
5. “May I suggest something?”

The Art of Questioning

The four main types of questions are:

1. Leading Questions

For example, “Would you like to talk about it?” “What happened then?” “Could you tell me more?”

2. Open-ended Questions

Use open-ended questions to expand the discussion — for example, lead with: “How? What? Where? Who? Which?”

3. Closed-ended Questions

Use closed ended questions to prompt for specifics — for example, lead with: “Is? Are? Do? Did? Can? Could? Would?”

4. Reflective Questions

Can help people understand more about what they said — for example, someone tells you, “I’m worried I won’t remember. . .” Reflective Q: “It sounds like you would like some help remembering?”

Source: National Aging Information & Referral Support Center