

ACTIVE LISTENING: What, Why & How

Before interacting with others, prepare to be a good listener.

- **Attitude of respect and acceptance** — Listening is never effective if you are judging or finding fault in the speaker. Respect their viewpoint and listen openly.
- **Availability as a listener** — Our busy lifestyles and many distractions may make unavailable as a listener. Make sure to put other issues aside, so the speaker does not feel neglected.
- **Sometimes we stop listening while focusing on what is going to happen next in the conversation** -- This can include things like rehearsing what we are going to say next in our mind, trying to read the mind of the speaker, jumping into problem solving too quickly, or interrogating the speaker. Being of these distractions within a conversation will allow you to have more conscious control over how and when you mentally shift away from listening to thinking about what you are going to say or do next.

Use **nonverbal cues** to show that you are interested and paying attention.

- **Facial expression**—friendly and relaxed. Adjust facial expression to match what the speaker is saying.
- **Gestures** —a simple head nod can indicate attention and interest. Small head nods show continued interest, and large head nods demonstrate agreement.
- **Posture** —Maintain an open position (arms and legs uncrossed), lean slightly forward to communicate attention and face the other person squarely.
- **Proximity** —Don't be positioned too close or too far away from the speaker. How close you are depends on the relationship with the person and may vary for different cultures.
- **Gaze and eye contact** —Maintaining eye contact with the speaker demonstrates interest and allows the listener to collect facial information. The meaning of eye contact may also vary depending on culture.
- **Avoid distractions** —Actively move away from distractions so that the other person has your full attention.

Encourage the speaker to continue and to assume control over the direction of the interaction using maintenance skills that foster effective listening are door openers and minimal encouragers.

- **A Door opener** non-coercive invitation to talk. This may be something like “you look as though something is troubling you” or “I've got time to talk if you need to talk”, or maintaining silence to give the person time to collect their thoughts. For close relationships where frequent disclosure has occurred in the past, door openers may be more concise like “what's up?”
- **Minimal encouragers** allow the listener to stay active in the process while still giving the speaker the freedom to direct and control the interaction. They should primarily show the speaker that he or she is being heard and that the listener is willing to continue attending. Most common are things like “mm-hmmm”, “Right”, “And?” or “Go on”.

Reflect what the speaker is saying to show the speaker that you understand what they are saying.

- **Paraphrasing** involves the listener making a clear and concise summary in your own words about what the speaker has just said. If you have paraphrased effectively the speaker will usually say something like “yes, that's right”. If you haven't, it gives the speaker an opportunity to correct you. This allows conversations to flow better and achieve complete understanding of the other person's point of view.
- **Empathy** is our ability to ‘put ourselves in their shoes”. This involves responding to the speaker's emotions, not just their words. When focused on feelings think about the strength of the feeling, and the existence of mixed feelings. Your ability to use empathy relies heavily on your ability to reflect feelings accurately. There are five features of effective reflecting:
 - *Focus on the main feeling*
 - *Use simple concise words and phrases*
 - *Reflect the feelings in your own voice and body messages*
 - *Reflect upon on the feelings if appropriate*
 - *Check for understanding*

Asking Questions

- **Open questions** allow a person to speak in more detail about a particular problem. They are helpful in the beginning of conversations because they give an opportunity to share thoughts and feelings about an issue.

COPE Center Parenting Workshop Pocket Reference

- *Closed questions* usually restrict answers to a simple yes or no. They are more commonly used at the end of a conversation.

Remember, keep your eyes focused on the person you are listening to. If you're having trouble focusing, be honest and let the speaker know. Suggest you both move to a less distracting place to speak. Better still, don't start the conversation until you know that you'll be able to give the speaker the attention they deserve.

At the end of the conversation, before you walk away or move on to what you have to do next:

- ✓ Check in with the speaker.
- ✓ Take a minute to summarize what you've been told and ask the speaker to confirm that this is what they have been trying to communicate.
- ✓ If in the course of the conversation either of you have agreed to do anything, make sure you both agree what that is, who is to do it, and when it will be done.
- ✓ If the conversation needs to be continued set a definite time and place for that to happen. Put a reminder on to your smart phone.
- ✓ Finally, let the speaker know how much you value what they have been telling you, even if it was hard to hear or painful. A hug, a reminder of how much you love or care about them no matter what never hurts.
- ✓ Remember, like anything else you learn, using active listening skill require practice and intention. Don't try to do it all at once. Pick out one skill to practice in the course of the day in all of your conversations. Over time and with practice the pieces will fall into place.

From <https://www.archguelph.ca/effective-communication>

Practice Your Active Listening Skills

1. Listen to what talker is saying and take notes.
2. When the talker is done speaking (5 minute limit), tell the talker what they said in your own words, without adding your point of view, without responding to, without judgment criticism, or body language.
3. Ask the talker if you "got it"
4. If the talker says "yes" proceed to next step by asking the talker is there more? Continue steps 1 through 4 until the talker says that "there is no more".
5. If the talker says that you "didn't quite get it", or that "you missed a part or all of it", ask the talker to tell you what you missed. Then repeat steps 1 through 3.
6. After steps 1 through 5 are completed and the talker has nothing more to add, the next step is to validate the talker's feelings. Validating feelings is a way to tell the talker how their feelings make sense to you, or in other words how you are able to understand them, by putting yourself in their shoes. This step takes practice, but is probably the most important of all the listening steps.
7. Switch roles and repeat steps 1 through 6.

A few tips for success:

1. If your schedule allows, practice this exercise with your partner on a daily basis for thirty minutes.
2. If possible do this exercise the same time every day (evening when the kids are down is preferred by many).
3. Start off having the speakers only talk about something neutral. It is easy listening to someone talk about their day rather than hearing how angry and disappointed they are with you.
4. Once both parties have mastered the technique, it is acceptable to talk about conflict with each other.

Additional Resources

- **How to Practice Active Listening** <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-active-listening-3024343>
- **Comic relief: Everybody Loves Raymond** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VOubVB4CTU>
- **How to use Active Listening** <http://hybridparenting.org/how-to-use-active-listening-with-children/>
- **You Know What I Mean? Giving Directions** (for parents of toddlers and preschoolers) http://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/videos/video_direct_vid.html

Find the slides from this workshop, today's handout as well as links to additional parenting resources at <http://www.supportingparentssexnj.org/>