

## How to be a Good Listener

**WHAT IS ACTIVE LISTENING?** It is the process of listening, clarifying, giving feedback, and self-disclosing. It involves the participation of both parties in verbal and non-verbal ways. Use of “I” statements is imperative.

**MAKE EYE CONTACT:** Be sure to look the speaker in the face most of the time, especially look at her/his eyes. If you forget to make eye contact, the speaker may think you are bored, withdrawn, or simply not listening. Also be culturally sensitive: some individuals may be uncomfortable with too much direct eye contact.

**TAKE A LISTENING POSITION:** Sit or stand in a comfortable position with your body aimed in the general area where the speaker is. Try to be in a relaxed position. Face the speaker and make appropriate eye contact. Be aware of other non-verbals: placement of arms, leaning forward when necessary, head nodding, degree of personal space, smiling.

**PARAPHRASE THE SPEAKER’S MESSAGE:** Paraphrasing means stating in your own words what someone has just said. Some common ways to lead into paraphrases include:

- What I hear you saying is...
- In other words
- So basically how you felt was...
- What happened was...
- Sounds like you’re feeling...

The speaker then has a chance to know you have understood what she/he has said. This also gives the speaker the opportunity to try to make the message more clear if she/he doesn’t think you really understood. Also be sure to reflect feeling words.

**ASK CLARIFYING QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING:** If something the speaker says is unclear to you, ask her/him a question to get more information. Such questions make you an active, interested listener; the speaker can tell that you’ve been listening enough to have a question and care enough to ask. Ask open ended questions when you need more information, e.g., “Could you give me an example of when you’ve had difficulty talking to your professor?” Avoid the overuse of closed questions; these are questions that just require a yes or no response and tend to halt communication.

**MAKE COMMENTS, ANSWER QUESTIONS:** When the speaker stops or pauses, you can be a good listener by making comments about the same subject. If you change the topic suddenly, she/he may think you weren’t listening. If the speaker asks a question, your answer can show you were listening. Also, use silence to your benefit versus attempting to fill the conversation with constant talk.

**PROVIDE APPROPRIATE FEEDBACK:** Your speaker is likely to be interested and invested in your opinions and feedback. Monitor your reactions to what they have to say and give reactions in nonjudgmental ways. Feedback should always be given in an honest and supportive way.

**EMPATHY:** Recognize that everyone is trying to survive, get through life successfully, build a support network and deal with the demands of outside life. Sometimes it can be difficult to be **empathic** if we have had different life experiences or would try a different solution than those tried by the other person.

**OPENNESS:** Listen with **openness**. Be a supportive, but neutral listener. This provides safety for self-disclosure and talk of emotional states. Be careful of judgments and stereotypes you have that block openness. Attempt to put yourself in the other person's shoes in terms of trying to understand how they feel, while also not becoming consumed with their difficulties. Incorporate your own self-care so that you do not burn out.

**AWARENESS:** Be **aware** of your own biases. We all have biases-this is part of human nature. The key is to not let them get in the way of what others have to say. Try to fully understand the person and their context versus relying on just your personal experience to guide them.

### ***BLOCKS TO LISTENING***

**THE SPEAKER'S CONTROL OF THE MESSAGE:** A two-way flow of information keeps listeners focused and involved. If the listener can feel free to keep the speaker posted on what and how the listener is feeling and thinking, and if the listener feels free to break in from time to time to clarify, check out the message, etc. then the listener is more involved in the message and is more likely to listen well and attentively. Sometimes the speaker's control of the message is too rigid and this blocks a two-way flow. Examples: lecturing, advice giving, reprimanding.

**ASSUMPTIONS:** Avoid clouding up your listening attention with assumptions about what the other person is trying to say, what they really mean, what they want the listener to do, etc. Assumptions are often not accurate and they certainly prevent the listener from focusing on what's being said. If I'm assuming, I'm not listening.

**BUZZ WORDS:** Most people have private buzz words which have a definite emotional charge, sometimes positive, sometimes more negative. When listeners hear their own buzz words, they're apt to reject or accept the whole message on the basis of their instant emotional reaction to the word or idea. When the buzz word hits, the listening stops.

**SILENT COUNTER-ARGUMENTS:** Listeners who find themselves challenged by what they hear may begin formulating their own counter-arguments while the message is still en route. The listener, though still apparently listening, has shifted focus to refuting what the speaker has "mistakenly" said.

**DISTRACTIONS:** Other things in the environment, in the listener's own mind, various stimuli that get in the way to truly attending to what another person is saying.

**INTERRUPTIONS:** In our haste to share our own ideas, we cut others off. This conveys to the speaker that you do not value what they have to say.