

Active Listening

1. Why you should try it

Often we'll listen to a conversation partner without really hearing them. In the process, we miss opportunities to connect with that person – and even risk making them feel neglected, disrespected, and resentful.

This exercise helps you express active interest in what another person has to say and make them feel heard – a way to foster empathy and connection. This technique is especially well-suited for difficult conversations (such as arguments with a partner) and for expressing support. Research suggests that using this technique can help others feel more understood and improve relationship satisfaction.

"One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood."

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA

2. How to do it

Find a quiet place where you can talk with a conversation partner without interruption or distraction. Invite them to share what's on their mind. As they do so, try to follow the steps below. You don't need to cover every step, but the more you do cover, the more effective this practice is likely to be.

Paraphrase. Once the other person has finished expressing a thought, paraphrase what they said to make sure you understand and to show that you are paying attention. Helpful ways to paraphrase include "What I hear you saying is...", "It sounds like...", and "If I understand you right..."

Ask Questions. When appropriate, ask questions to encourage the other person to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings. Avoid jumping to conclusions about what the other person means. Instead, ask questions to clarify their meaning, such as, "When you say _____, do you mean _____?"

Express Empathy. If the other person voices negative feelings, strive to validate these feelings rather than questioning or defending against them. For example, if the speaker expresses frustration, try to consider why they feel that way, regardless of whether you think that feeling is justified or whether you would feel that way yourself were you in their position. You might respond, "I can sense that you're feeling frustrated," and even "I can understand how that situation could cause frustration."

Use engaged body language. Show that you are engaged and interested by making eye contact, nodding, facing the other person, and maintaining an open and relaxed body posture. Avoid attending to distractions in your environment or checking your phone. Be mindful of your facial expressions: avoid expressions that might communicate disapproval or disgust.

Avoid judgment. Your goal is to understand the other person's perspective and accept it for what it is, even if you disagree with it. Try not to interrupt with counterarguments or mentally prepare a rebuttal while the other person is speaking.

Avoid giving advice. Problem-solving is likely to be more effective after both conversation partners understand one another's perspective and feel heard. Moving too quickly into advice-giving can be counterproductive.

Take turns. After the other person has had a chance to speak and you have engaged in the active listening steps above, ask if it's okay for you to share your perspective. When sharing your perspective, express yourself as clearly as possible using "I" statements (e.g. "I feel overwhelmed when you don't help out around the house"). It may also be helpful, when relevant, to express empathy for the other person's perspective (e.g. "I know you've been busy lately and don't mean to leave me hanging...")

3. Why it works

Active listening helps listeners better understand others' perspectives and helps speakers feel more understood and less threatened.

This technique can prevent miscommunication and spare hurt feelings on both sides. By improving communication and preventing arguments from escalating, active listening can make relationships more enduring and satisfying.

"Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here's to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding."

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE



Practicing active listening with someone close to you can also help you listen better when interacting with other people in your life.



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