

Listening With Your Heart

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Good listeners focus on others, show respect, and ask questions. As a result, good listeners are able to build relationships, solve problems, avoid miscommunication, and increase self-esteem in others.

Why Listen?

Being listened to and truly heard has a huge emotional and psychological impact on all of us. Most of us have experienced the feeling of not being listened to at one time or another. Those who experience this regularly begin to feel that no one cares about them and what they think. This can lead to discouragement, depression, or anger.

A good listener can help a person feel important — that the only thing the listener wants to do at the moment is to hear and understand what they have to say. This can result in a feeling of calm, peacefulness, and good self-esteem. Good listeners truly listen with their heart.

The good listener is judged by the person being heard as a very fine person, simply because they listened and heard what was being said. Good listeners gain the respect and admiration of people around them because of their listening skills and ability to focus on someone else. Good listeners can build good relationships with other people in this important way.

Benefits of Listening

- **Good listening helps promote cooperation** among family members and coworkers. A person who is frequently interrupted or ignored when they speak will often stop talking about their experiences or ideas.
- **Good listening can help solve problems and prevent trouble.** If we only hear or understand part of what is said to us, we may rush headlong into a situation without a full understanding of it. This can lead to other problems. Fully listening to each individual helps us see the world from their standpoint and helps avoid future conflicts.
- **Good listening helps reduce tension.** Being listened to has a cathartic (cleansing) effect on our psychological well-being. It feels good to tell someone about a problem or situation that is bothering us, particularly if we feel accepted and heard. In other words, “getting it off your chest” is a good thing.

Nonlistening

We fail to listen to others when we don’t stop talking ourselves. We cannot listen and talk at the same time. This doesn’t mean it’s necessary to be totally silent, but our focus needs to be on the other person’s words and ideas rather than our own.

We are also not good listeners when **our minds are full of other things**. Sometimes the over-scheduled nature of today’s world causes us to be poor listeners. The mind can be someplace entirely different than the here and now. If we are thinking about what happened at work, things we need to do, how little time we have to get it all done, and why the washer isn’t working, chances are pretty slim that we will really hear what our family members have to say.

It is common for us to hear the words someone says but **not focus on what the person means by those words**. A typical conversation might go like this:

“Mom, you’re not listening to me.”

“Yes I am. You said Bobby got hurt at school today. . . Oh, my goodness, Bobby got hurt? Is he okay?”

The words go into the brain, but the meaning does not emerge until we stop and focus.

The poor listener may **filter the other person’s words through their own experiences** to such an extent that the real meaning gets garbled. For example, your friend Susan may tell you about a most marvelous experience she and her family had camping last weekend. What comes to your mind is a bad camping experience you once had, and you fail to note that Susan had a wonderful time. Carried to the extreme, this kind of nonlistening can lead to major misunderstandings. Suppose you go home and tell your teenage son that Susan had an awful time camping (because you weren’t really listening), and he tells his friend, Susan’s son, that she had a bad time. Then Susan’s son thinks his mom doesn’t like camping and never suggests they go again. That family misses some good time together simply because you weren’t listening.

We can **think faster than we can talk**. In the time it takes someone to say 100 words, we have the capacity to hear 500 to 1,000 words. This means that while we are listening, our brains are also doing other things. No wonder we sometimes miss something! To avoid this, we can consciously tell ourselves to focus on what the person is saying instead of letting our mind wander.

Interference by other things often affects our ability to really listen. With the radio, TV, or music blaring, we may not

be concentrating on what the other person is saying. We are bombarded by other sounds all day long, as well — several people carrying on a conversation nearby, outdoor sounds such as horns and traffic, and the constant barrage of electronic and mechanical equipment may have a huge impact on whether we really listen. Have you ever tried to talk to someone on the phone while playing a computer card game? Chances are good the person on the other end believes you are losing your ability to communicate.

Finally, **thinking about what to say next when the person we are listening to pauses** frequently causes poor listening. We may be on the same topic but are forming our own response rather than really hearing what they are saying and responding to their comments. For example, they may be telling you about their vacation. You want to tell them about yours. Instead of focusing on their vacation and asking them questions about it, you are formulating sentences and reminding yourself to tell about your experience in a particular restaurant.

The poor listener limits their own learning experiences. So much can be learned by listening to other people and trying to understand things from their perspective. Without this kind of interchange, we are limited to what we have in our own mind. The understandings and thoughts of others are enriching to our own lives.

The Good Listener

The first thing we need to do to become a good listener is to **stop talking**. That doesn't mean don't talk at all, but rather focus on understanding what the other person has to say. Our own thoughts and words often get in the way of really hearing what other people are talking about.

We also may need to **stop doing what we're doing**. This is not always easy, but when a person really wants to talk, they may need our full concentration. Although we may be busy with the demands of our day, it is important to stop and focus on the person and their conversation.

Look at the person talking. Notice what kinds of emotions they are expressing. What can you determine by looking in their eyes? What does their body language indicate about how they feel about what they are saying? Are their arms crossed in defense or frustration, or are they relaxed and at ease? Though all this may seem like a lot to take note of in one conversation, practice will help develop skills in these kinds of observations so it becomes almost automatic.

Ask questions, not prying questions but questions to help them continue their story. "Then what happened?" "Tell me more." "What do you think about that?" These kinds of questions help the person who is talking feel that you care about what they are saying and that they can tell you the whole situation. Nod your head to indicate you understand.

Reflect back your interpretation of what they are saying. Possible comments might be "It sounds like that was really **hard to do**," "That would be **scary**," "**You were trying** to do the right thing," or "Now **you feel** you need to make a decision about it." Then ask if that is right. Did you recognize what they are experiencing correctly? If not, have them tell you more.

This type of listening, sometimes called reflective listening, is sometimes misused and the listener just ends up repeating what the person said. That type of listening is alright, but it feels fairly artificial. It feels more natural if you process their

words slightly and come out with an interpretation of your understanding of their experience. Words used in the examples that indicate this interpretation are in bold. It is important to recognize that reflective listening is not an opportunity to try to analyze the other person or their experience. It is simply a way to help them get their story out.

Be respectful of the speaker. In a world in which put downs and negative comments are common, we need listeners who can treat the speaker with respect. This includes valuing their individual characteristics and ideas, and indicating genuine interest in them and their comments. This can have a powerful impact on the person and on your relationship with them.

When listening becomes difficult. Occasionally we encounter a person who is very open about their experiences and may tell you personal things that you really do not want to know. Some individuals can listen to almost anything and respond with kindness. Others find the revealing of personal experiences rather embarrassing. If you are one of the latter, you can still treat the person with respect but gently guide the conversation in a different direction. A blunt "I really don't want to hear this," will hurt feelings and cause a rift in your relationship.

Another situation in which listening can become difficult is when we are confronted with the overly talkative speaker. In a group we can sometimes refocus the conversation by asking a different person a question. In other situations we can introduce an activity to the group to help focus the conversation around the activity rather than the long monologue by one individual. If you are alone with a long winded speaker, sometimes it's just time to get out your knitting (or whatever), and let them talk.

The Special Art of Listening to Children

Everything that applies to listening to adults also applies to listening to children. However, there are some special skills that will help provide the best listening environment for children.

Keep in mind that children are sometimes not particularly good listeners themselves. It may take awhile for them to develop listening skills, just as it does for adults. We can teach children by example to be better listeners, but the demanding tone of voice used when we say things like, "Are you listening to me?" can have a negative influence on communicating with children.

Most children who are around 10 years old and younger are fairly small. Adults can communicate with them better if they sit down beside them, or if they sit at a table with them so they can see them eye to eye (*Figure 1*). Sometimes the adult can bend over or kneel down. It's not unusual for children to believe that adults never listen to them, and part of this may be because the adults do not look at their face or eyes when they are talking to them. So, to listen to a child, look at them and get on their level physically.

If you work with a child who seems off in another universe when you are speaking to them, it may help to gently turn their face towards you, and say "Let's talk. You talk and I'll listen, then I'll talk and you listen." Some adults have been successful at getting a child to listen to them by consistently using the word "focus." Just the one word, used often and all by itself, can help a child come back to the present. This



Figure 1. Putting yourself at eye level with a child lets them know you are paying attention to their words.

may be more effective with elementary age children than it is with preschoolers.

When listening to a child tell you something, it is *not* a good time to correct their grammar, tell them to sit up straight, or comment about other issues. Let them get their story out. Even though you may want to hear their story, it's not going to be effective if they are being corrected, no matter how lovingly you may make the corrections.

Encourage a child to tell you about everyday things on a regular basis. Each child needs an opportunity to tell you what happened during the day. If you have several children, you cannot focus on each child all at the same time. Each child needs a special time with you. It might be when they first get home from school, at bedtime during tuck in time, or in the car on the way to somewhere. Whatever time you choose, it is time for them to talk and for you to listen and ask questions.

Children who have been listened to well are much more likely to tell their parent when something difficult or uncomfortable happens. If they can't count on you to listen when they are talking about little things, how can they depend on listening when the issues are big.

Time may be a more important factor in listening to a child than when listening to an adult. It may be difficult for them to find the right words to say what they have in their mind. Don't comment on stuttering or long pauses. Patience is a virtue when listening to children.

Listening to Elderly Persons

Elderly persons enjoy reliving experiences from their past through storytelling. You can be of great benefit to an elderly person by listening to their life stories. It is helpful to them because it helps build a tie with the people, times, and places

of their younger days. It also helps them remember times when they were doing good and worthwhile things for other people. Remembering the past can reduce their concerns about the present and can build self esteem and increase pleasure.

Learning about the past experiences of elderly persons can also be beneficial to yourself. If the older person is a relative, you will learn much about your ancestors and family heritage. If they are unrelated to you, you will still learn about the times and events of the past. Listening to their stories will help build your bond with the person.

Don't be surprised if there is a lot of repetition in stories they tell you. They may have forgotten they told you that part, or they may just enjoy the retelling. Be patient.

Summary

Good listening helps build relationships, solve problems, and build self-esteem in others. We can be good listeners if we open our hearts and minds to the messages of others, ask questions, focus on what they are saying, and treat them with respect. Although good listening is sometimes difficult, we will benefit not only in our relationships with others, but will learn new ideas and have an opportunity to share in the thoughts of others.

Resources

Morgan, Philip, and Baker, Kent. Supervisory Management, November 1995. "Habits to Differentiate Good From Poor Listening." www.managementhelp.org/commskls/listen/gd_vs_pr.htm

Smith, Carl. "How Can Parents Model Good Listening Skills?" www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/How_Can_Parents_Model.html

Lee, Dick and Hatesohl, Delmar. University of Missouri Extension. "Listening: Our Most Used Communication Skill." muextension.missouri.edu/explore/comm/cm0150.htm

Acknowledgement

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