

# A Guide to Active Listening



## Description

### Be Patient

Establishing trust takes time. Don't expect someone who you have never met to share a sensitive story without getting some assurance that you have their best interests in mind.

### Let Them Lead

Avoid mentally preparing a response while the speaker is talking. Even if you have the best intentions, you may end up steering the conversation. This can come off as having an agenda even if you are simply trying to move things along.

### The Power of Paraphrasing

When someone shares a challenge they have undergone, you may feel compelled to offer solutions. But offering solutions can come off as dismissive. Paraphrasing is the simple but powerful art of translating situations into the resulting feeling or experience. Usually, you can know from their reaction whether you hit the nail on the head.

### Ask Questions

Once the speaker has completed his/her thought, ask open-ended questions to encourage the speaker to provide full and meaningful responses. Bonus: Asking probing questions is a great way to show that you're truly listening because it allows you to recall something that was said earlier.

### The Gift of Silence

Resist the urge to fill the silence with banter, ideas, explanations, or even information. When sharing on difficult topics, people may need a moment to gather themselves or reflect. Give them that space.

### Your Body Language

Though active listening requires you to remain mostly silent, you can demonstrate that you are actively engaged through basic gestures.

## Examples

- ✓ Don't look at your watch while someone is talking.
- ✓ Don't rush or push people to "get to the point."
- ✓ If the speaker is having a hard time formulating their thoughts, be prepared with open-ended or probing questions.

- ✓ Even if you have relevant information to share, try not to interrupt the speaker.
- ✓ Share information after you've built rapport/trust AND the speaker has completed his/her thoughts.

If someone shares that they are scared about sending their kids to school knowing that they are being given contaminated water:

- ✗ Don't say: "Why don't you just give them bottled water?"
- ✓ Instead, say: "It must be frustrating to feel like you can't protect your kids."

- ✓ Ask for clarification, e.g.,: "Earlier when you talked about being afraid to send your child to school, how did you end up deciding what to do?"

- ✓ Nod or shake your head to show you heard them.
- ✓ Empathize with a brief comment (see **Power of Paraphrasing** above).

- ✓ Make eye contact throughout the conversation.
- ✓ Nod in understanding.
- ✓ Shake your head in empathy.
- ✓ Lean in toward the speaker.

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### Read the Speaker's Body Language

Pay attention to the speaker's non-verbal cues to gauge whether you have "outstayed your welcome" or if perhaps it is not a good time for them to be sharing or maybe they are just uncomfortable sharing altogether.

### Remote Engagement

"Demonstrating" listening is much more difficult remotely. However, if you must engage remotely, try to encourage the use of video when at all possible. Show your commitment by using video even if the person speaking chooses not to.

### Show Empathy

Empathy creates a safe and compassionate environment, setting the foundation for effective communication with the speaker. Put yourself in the speaker's shoes to help you understand things from their perspective. Show that you acknowledge their emotions and opinions by validating how they feel.

## Examples

- ✓ The speaker frequently looks at their watch or phone or is distracted by others (i.e., kids, family, etc.).
- ✓ Depending on the circumstances, you could say "It looks like now may not be a good time" or "If you don't feel comfortable sharing..."
- ✓ Make it obvious that you aren't typing or checking emails by making your hands visible.
- ✓ If possible, find a space in your home/office where nobody will walk through your camera view (i.e., behind you). If someone is sharing sensitive information, seeing others walk by (even if you are using headphones) can make them feel exposed.
- ✓ Use phrases like "This must be very difficult for you" or "What I hear you saying is" or "I really appreciate you sharing this with me."
- ✓ Make eye contact with the speaker.
- ✓ Nod in understanding.

