

Active Listening Skills

Listening is the foundation of good one to one interaction. It sounds easy but most of us, even when we think that we are good listeners, do not really listen carefully and accurately when others are speaking to us. This handout contains some useful tips for listening well, or active listening, as well as some of the reasons why this might be difficult for us.

Non – verbal listening skills:

Adequate eye contact is usually the most important way of communicating one's full and undivided attention. Focus your eyes on the other person and gently shift your gaze from his or her face to another part of the body, such as a gesturing hand or a tapping foot, back to the face and the eyes. Occasionally moving your gaze away from the person will reduce the chances of causing him or her to feel anxiety or suspicion. Avoid looking away for long periods. Let yourself be natural.

Non-verbal prompts demonstrate listening while also serving to encourage the person to continue speaking. Affirmative head nodding, appropriate facial gestures and the use of silence are all helpful ways to show that you are really listening. Silence can be helpful in allowing the speaker time to think about what they have said, what you said, or to get in touch with their feelings, however uncomfortable they might be. We have to work hard within ourselves to feel comfortable with silence as for many of us, our first instinct is to rush to say something either to rescue the other person or to take away our own discomfort.

Relaxing your own body will usually encourage the other person to relax also. When your body shows openness and receptivity, the other person is likely to talk freely and be less defensive. Facing the person rather than sitting to the side, and leaning slightly forward to indicate interest are helpful tips. Crossing your arms does not help you to look relaxed.

Verbal listening skills:

Encouraging – 'Tell me some more', 'You were saying earlier', 'Could you explain that more fully?'

Acknowledging – 'I understand', 'I see', 'That sounds really important to you'.

Checking – 'You seem really angry', 'Am I right in thinking that you said...?'

Clarifying – 'I'm not sure I understand. Did you say...?', 'Did you say this happened once or twice?'

Affirming – 'I appreciate that you have been so open with me'

Empathy - 'I can understand why you are worried by this', 'I think this situation has been very difficult for you and you are getting impatient'.

Asking open-ended questions – 'Can you tell me more about that', 'How do you feel about it?', 'I'm wondering what your options are here'.

Reflecting – 'I can hear the anger in your voice'; 'You look very happy about that'.

Summarising – 'So there seem to be several things that are important to you'.

Helpful hints for active listening:

- Don't talk about yourself
- Don't change topics
- Don't advise, diagnose, criticise
- Don't think ahead about what you will say
- Don't ignore or deny the other person's feelings. Assess how they are feeling from what they are not saying as well as what they are
- Don't pretend you have understood them if you haven't

Blocks to listening:

Here are some common blocks to listening:

Comparing – while someone is talking you are thinking things like 'I wouldn't have done that', 'In my experience this is what happens...'. This stops you really hearing what the other person is saying.

Mind reading – looking for hidden meanings. You don't really trust what the other person is saying because you think s/he is covering up what they really want or think. So you are trying to guess what s/he really means by paying more attention to subtle changes in intonation and expression rather than the actual words.

Rehearsing – you don't have time to really listen because you are planning and rehearsing what you are going to say next.

Being right – you can't listen to criticism and can't take suggestions to change. You always have to have the last word.

Derailing – by suddenly changing the subject because you are bored or uncomfortable. You can also derail by making a joke in order to avoid the discomfort or anxiety you might feel if you really listened to the other person.

Placating – agreeing eagerly from a desire to please or to seem supportive. You may half listen to get the drift but are not really involved.