

Active Listening: a communication resource

Active listening is a form of therapeutic or empathetic listening, which focuses on understanding the speaker's perspective, and encouraging them to explore their thoughts and emotions. Like most skills, active listening takes time, effort, and practice to learn. Other types of listening include critical listening (listening to evaluate the information or message), and informational listening (listening to learn). Active listening is neither of these: its purpose is help you listen thoroughly and understand the speaker's point of view. Often active listening is used when supporting someone, building trust, and discussing difficult experiences. It can help the listener focus on what is being said, rather than their thoughts about it.

Give feedback.

Show you're listening and make it easier for the speaker to continue by giving feedback. This may include facing the speaker, making eye contact, leaning toward them, nodding, or saying "yes" or "mm hmm". Assure them with verbal or non-verbal cues that you want to hear what they have to say.

Reflect.

Reflect back what was said with questions, such as "so what you're saying is...". Mirroring means using the same words as the speaker, and shows that you are listening. Paraphrasing is putting it into your own words, and shows that you are trying to understand.

Ask Questions.

Ask questions to encourage the speaker. Relevant questions help build or clarify the speaker's thoughts. Open ended questions invite them to elaborate. Ask what they've tried or what solutions they see rather than offering advice. If you don't follow, ask for clarification – "what did you mean when you said...?"

Defer Judgement.

Defer judgement while you listen. Remain open, rather than quickly forming an opinion. If you find yourself disagreeing, try to see the situation from their perspective – it doesn't mean you have to agree. Remember that the point is to understand their experience.

Pay Attention.

Listen for the message, as well as intent and emotions. Listen for what is being said, and what is being left unsaid. Watch and listen for non-verbal cues. Tone, facial expressions, and body language can help you understand the emotions and the strength of the emotions, as well inconsistencies between what is said and non-verbal cues being expressed.

Focus.

Focus. Don't interrupt the speaker with your thoughts or actions, and try to stay focused on what they're saying rather than thinking about your opinions or something else. Never interrupt or finish a sentence for the speaker. Changing the subject (even subtly) can make the speaker think that you are uninterested or have not been listening.

Be patient.

Allow for pauses, give the speaker time to reflect and explore their thoughts. Avoid rushing toward problem solving.

Name the Emotions.

Name the emotions, without making a judgement on the accuracy of the facts, for example "it sounds like that was really frustrating for you". You can validate the speakers emotions without having to agree with their reasons. For example, "if you thought x it's totally understandable why you felt y".

Summarise.

Summarise the speaker's main points at the end of the conversation, so that you both know whether you have understood them correctly. Be concise, and be prepared to be corrected. After the conversation, the speaker and listener should have the same understanding of what was said.



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