Active Listening – So Simple, But So Effective

“If we were supposed to talk more than we listen, we would have two tongues and one ear.”
— Mark Twain

Before we consider active listening, let’s clarify the difference between listening and hearing. First, listening describes an intentional activity. When we’re listening, we’re actively trying to hear something. Hearing, on the other hand, is inactive. We do this without thinking. We’re aware of sounds, but we’re not paying attention. When we truly listen in a conversation, we hear the other person’s words, not just sounds.

In active listening, we not only pay attention to the words the other person is conveying, but to their non-verbal communication, or “body language.” So much of what we communicate to one another is not put into words. In fact, our eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and posture often say a lot more than our words. And this applies to both people in a conversation. It’s important that the listener also shows the speaker that they’re being heard and that what they’re saying is of interest. When the listener provides feedback, the person speaking feels more comfortable and will communicate more easily and honestly.

When someone is speaking to us and we truly listen to their words and notice their body language, it’s no longer just about sound. We hear and feel the other person’s thoughts, expectations, memories, beliefs, feelings. We connect with them, and in making this connection, we strengthen our relationship with them by building mutual understanding and trust.

Here are a few tips for practicing active listening:

- First, sit facing the other person with an open, "available" posture.
- Relax and really focus on what they’re saying, verbally and non-verbally. Put other things out of your mind and don’t allow yourself to be distracted. Shut off your phone.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Actively show signs of listening throughout the conversation.
- Give encouragement by nodding your head, smiling when appropriate, affirmative words, etc.
- Show empathy with words or touch.
- Reflect feelings and content to show attention and comprehension.
- If appropriate, ask open-ended questions. For example, How did that make you feel? would help the person share their feelings. Questions like Were you hurt by what he said? or just Were you hurt? are dead-end question that only result in a yes or no response rather than further meaningful conversation.
- Ask relevant questions to clarify what the speaker has said.
- Be patient. Don’t jump in with questions or comments whenever there’s a pause. Give the speaker a chance to explore and express their thoughts and feelings.
- Avoid thinking about what you’re going to say next.
- Don’t interrupt. If you interrupt to make a point, you’re not listening.
- Try not to get ahead of the speaker by assuming what they’re going to say next. Let them finish.
- Don’t be judgmental in thoughts or words.
You’ll be amazed at the difference active listening will make in all your relationships. Give it a try—it’s so simple to show others you care about them, and about what they have to say.

“The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. . . . A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.”

—Rachel Naomi Remen