

## How Good Are Your Listening Skills?

We all like to think we are good listeners but do we really know the difference between the type of listening that makes the other person feel supported as opposed to just waiting to express our own thoughts and opinions? Are we listening just to decide what our reply will be?

## What Is Active Listening?

Active listening means listening to understand and not just to reply. It involves putting our own needs and opinions on pause, giving our full attention to the other person and handing over permission for them to mentally offload.

It is most effective for conversations with another person who is dealing with something considerably emotional.

However, it can also be useful when the person is grappling with anything complex or troublesome, or for hearing grievances - especially if they are against us!

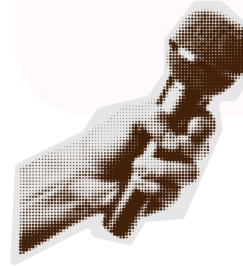
## Why don't we always share our problems with those closest to us?

In a study of over 2,000 American citizens, Harvard sociologist Mario Luis Small found that slightly more than half of the time, people confide their most pressing worries to individuals they either barely know or have weak ties to. Why choose these people over close family members or friends? Some participants said they feared judgement, insensitivity or drama, others were worried about burdening loved ones.

Mario Luis Small (2019). *SOMEONE TO TALK TO: how networks matter in practice*. S.L.: Oxford Univ Press.

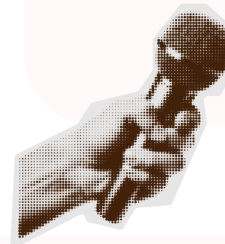
There is a thing that I do: W-A-I-T. It stands for 'Why Am I Talking?' . . . I wrote that down in a notebook that I keep to remind myself that listening, for me anyway, is a disciplinary art.

Tom Hanks



"Empathy is a choice and it is a vulnerable choice because in order to connect with you I have to connect with something inside myself that knows that feeling."

Dr Brené Brown



# Active Listening: 7 Principles

The below is just a guide. Remember it's more important to try to be empathetic and genuine than to follow a checklist!

Components	What does it involve?	Examples
Paying attention	Removing distractions and using non-verbal and verbal cues that signal to the other person that you have their full attention.	Putting down your phone, turning your body towards the speaker, making good eye contact, relaxed hands.
Encouraging	Giving small signals to the other person shows it's ok for them to continue.	Nodding, smiling (or frowning to express you recognise a difficult situation) "mm-hmm" .... "ok" .... "I see"
Reflecting & Clarifying	Asking short questions as well as making inferences (as long as we check they are correct), helps to show the person that we care, as well as allowing us to get on the same page.	"This situation is clearly leaving you <b>drained</b> , as you say - and it's having a significant impact at home too - am I right?" "Help me understand..." "Is it that...?" "Would it be correct to say...X?" "You're feeling left out?" "In other words, what you are saying is that you're frustrated"
Eliciting	Asking open-ended questions to draw more out of the speaker. <b>OR</b> waiting in silence to give them space to say more.	"How does that make you feel?" "What else?" "Can you help me understand?" Taking a pause. "What else leads you to believe this?"
Validating	Acknowledging the gravity and importance of their emotions helps build trust through empathy.	"It sounds like this past week has been very hard - that must be really tough" "I'm so glad you spoke to me because this is really important." "I can totally see why you feel alone in this"
Summarising	Using all that we've learned from the speaker so far to paraphrase and sum up what they have said.	"These are the points I've heard you make so far...." "It seems like the crux of the issue is"
Guiding	Acknowledging their message and suggesting ways to move forward. Remember some problems just can't be fixed (and that's ok).	"Some people find it helpful to try X or Y." "Have you considered..." "You aren't alone - I'm here with you"

# Active Listening: Try not to.....

## 1. Get distracted

Looking at your phone or out of the window can signal to the speaker that they don't have your full attention.

## 2. Interrupt

It makes the speaker feel like you are rushing them to move on or imposing your own flow on the conversation.

## 3. Make unchecked assumptions

Assuming how the other person is feeling or what their situation is, before they've had a chance to tell you is not helpful. If you're not sure - ask a question.

## 4. Skip to advice

Naturally we feel good when others value our opinion or guidance. Sometimes, however, the other person just needs us to sit with them in their feelings first. It can help them process their emotions.

## 5. Be afraid of silence

Sometimes silence is what the other person needs in order to build up to expressing how they are really feeling, or make the link between ideas.

## 8. Shift emphasis back onto you

Take care when relating things to your own life. It can invite unintended comparisons, making the other person feel guilty, that they should be dealing with things as you did, or that you don't really understand that things are different for them.

## 7. Diminish their feelings

As Dr Brené Brown mentions, the phrase "At least..." can quite often shift the focus back to you or seek to diminish their feelings.

## 8. Just be a parrot!

Mirroring their words is fine to a degree but if that's **all you do** then it will quickly come across as insincere or that you have put in minimal effort!

## A point to remember.....

Making eye contact can be uncomfortable for some autistic people (listeners or speakers), while some people with ADHD may find paying attention during conversations difficult. In these cases, fiddling with things and asking lots of questions can be positive activities that are helping the listener stay engaged.

