

Why Listening Is So Important

Some material excerpted from
The Lost Art of Listening by Michael P. Nichols, Ph.D.,
The Guilford Press, 1995

Few aspects of human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood. When we think someone listens, we believe we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are acknowledged, and that we have something to share. A listener's empathy, which is an understanding of what we are trying to say and showing it, builds a bond linking us to someone who seems to understand and care, thus confirming that our feelings are recognizable and legitimate.

*We cannot change the direction of the wind,
but we can adjust our sails.*

When deeply felt but unexpressed feelings take shape in the words that we share and those words come back clarified, the result is a reassuring sense of being understood and a grateful feeling of humanness with the one who understands. If listening strengthens our relationships by cementing our connection with another, it also fortifies our sense of self. In the presence of a receptive listener, we are able to clarify what we think and discover what we feel. So, in giving an account of our experience to someone who listens well, we are better able to listen to ourselves, identify interests, needs, and resolution.

Listening is so basic that we take it for granted. Unfortunately, most of us think of ourselves as better listeners than we really are. To listen is to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved, and appreciate another. It is especially hurtful not to be listened to in those relationships you count on for understanding. The need to be heard is one of the most powerful motive forces in human nature.

We define and sustain ourselves in conversations with others. The recognition of being listened to is the response from another person that tells us that our feelings, actions, and intentions are meaningful. Who we are and what we say triggers other people's response to us. That response and our connection to others remain vital to our psychological well-being. Being listened to spells the difference between feeling accepted and feeling isolated.

When the communication process breaks down, we might assume that the other person didn't say what she meant or didn't hear what we were saying. Usually, both parties to a

misunderstanding feel that way, but it may be helpful to realize that — between speaker and listener — there are filters to meaning. The speaker, who has an intention of what he or she wants to communicate, sends a message, and that message has an impact on the listener. Good communication means having the impact you meant to have, but every message must pass through a filter of the speaker's clarity of expression and the listener's ability to comprehend what was said. Some of the reasons for misunderstanding are simple and can be improved and learned: for example, by learning to give feedback, listeners tell speakers about the impact of the message and give them a chance to clarify their intentions. However, many other reasons for misunderstanding are less straightforward and not amenable to simple formulas for improvement.

We don't usually stop to examine patterns of misunderstanding in our lives because we're stuck in our own point of view. Misunderstandings hurt, and when we're hurt we tend to look outside ourselves for explanations. In this type of linear thinking we often reduce human interactions to a matter of personalities. Attributing other people's lack of understanding to character protects us from our own ignorance and passivity. That some people repeat their annoying ways with most others they come in contact with does not prove that lack of responsiveness is fixed in character; it only proves that these individuals trigger many people to play out the reciprocal role in their dramas of two way disharmony.

The Real Reasons People Don't Listen

Listening is an art by which we use empathy to reach across the space between us. Passive attention doesn't work. Not only is listening an active process, it often takes a deliberate effort to suspend our own needs and reactions. To listen well you must hold back what you have to say and control the urge to interrupt or argue. The art of listening requires a submersion of the self and immersion in the other. This is not always easy — especially when we are interested but too concerned with controlling or instructing or reforming the other person to be truly open to their point of view.

Effective listening requires attention, appreciation, and affirmation. You begin the process by tuning in to the speaker, paying attention to what he has to say, and placing no barriers between you. You can take the first step by making a conscientious effort to set aside whatever is on your mind long enough to concentrate on hearing what is being said.

Better listening doesn't start with a set of techniques; it starts with making a sincere effort to pay attention to what's going on in your conversational partner's private world of experience. Understanding one another is a give and take process. The best way to get the listening you need is to make the other person feel listened to first. Most people don't really listen or pay attention to your point of view until they become convinced that you have heard and appreciate theirs. Even when you are the one initiating a discussion about something of concern to you, the best way to ensure that you'll be heard is to invite the other person to explain her viewpoint before you present yours. Suspending your agenda in order to hear out the other person enables you to understand what he thinks, helps

make him feel understood, and clears the way for him to be more willing to listen to you. Let the other person know you are interested in what he has to say by inviting him to say what's on his mind, what his opinion is, or how he feels about the issue under consideration, and give him your full attention.

Anytime you demonstrate a willingness to listen with a minimum of defensiveness, criticism, or impatience, you are giving the gift of understanding and earning the right to have it reciprocated. Suspending your needs long enough to hear the other person out is part of willing yourself to listen, but suspending your needs is not the same as becoming a *nonsel*. Trying to listen when you're really not up to it dries up your capacity to empathize. Some listeners are so fearful of exerting their own individuality that they become *nonselves*, tucked into others, embedded in a safe framework of obligations and duties. These people find it easier to accommodate than to deal with conflict, threats of rejection, arguments, or signs of distress in others. Such compliant people may seem like good listeners but aren't really listening if they are nothing but a passive receptacle or reluctant sponge.

Listening well is often silent but never passive.

Effective communication is not achieved simply by taking turns talking but requires a concerted effort at mutual understanding. A good way to promote understanding is to take time to restate the other person's position in your own words, then ask her to correct or affirm your understanding of her thoughts and feelings. If you work on this process of explicit feedback and confirmation until the other person has no doubt that you grasp her position, she will feel understood, and she will then be more open to hearing from you. The simple failure to acknowledge what the other person says explains much of the friction in our lives. Furthermore, you don't have to be responsible for someone's feelings to be aware of them and to acknowledge them. When two people keep restating their own positions without acknowledging what the other is trying to say, the result is dueling points of view. Whether or not someone is really listening, only that person truly knows; but, if someone does not feel listened to, he doesn't feel listened to. We judge whether or not others are listening to us by the signals we see.

How to Get the Listening You Deserve

One way to get the listening you need is to tell people what you want.

- “I'm not asking you to agree with me, but can you understand where I'm coming from?”
- “I want to tell you something, and I don't want you to react. Just listen and tell me what I'm saying, will you?”
- “I want your opinion about something, but then I'll have to figure out what I want to do. Will you give me some advice, even if I don't end up following it?”

If someone gives advice when you just want to be listened to, say so, but put the emphasis on what you want, not on how intrusive he is: “Thank you for the advice, but

right now I just want to tell you what happened and have you understand how I feel” works better than “I didn’t ask for your advice. Just listen will you?” or “Can’t you just listen for once, without always telling me what to do?”

If someone cuts in when you’re talking and starts to interrupt you can:

- Hold up your index finger
- Say “Wait a minute, I’m not finished.”
- Just keep talking...”What I was trying to say is...”

If someone does cut you off:

- Instead of getting upset, practice saying, “I wasn’t finished; please hear me out.” Then go back to what you were saying and finish it.
- Comment on feeling cut off, but listen without lecturing or attacking:
- “I wish you’d let me finish what I was saying.”
- “I’m sorry, but I can’t pay attention to your story because I wasn’t finished telling mine.”

People who talk too much are difficult to endure, but their need for our attention is genuine. Their neediness is a burden, but they shouldn’t be made to feel ashamed of it. Shaming people for their needs makes them feel worse and intensifies the need.

One of the secrets of dealing with difficult people in our lives is to figure out how to play the hand we’re dealt, rather than complaining and moaning about what the hand is. The reason some people in our lives remain one dimensional is because that’s as far as we go with them. We’ve noted that listening well means suspending our needs, including the need to do something — to solve problems, to say the right thing, even to act attentive. It is better to be attentive, be interested, listen hard, and overcome the need to get credit for listening.



THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR
Compassionate Organizations

Nonprofit • Public Health • Public Service

426 West Bloom Street
Louisville, Kentucky 40208-1735 • USA
+01 (502) 413-2123 • mail@compassionate.center

www.compassionate.center