

You Can Have Excellent Listening Skills

Any professional counselor will tell you that one of the biggest problems they see among their clients is poor listening skills. People get into trouble in their relationships because they have not developed their ability to listen and communicate.

Barriers to Effective Communication

There are some good reasons why many people are less-than-effective communicators. These are the most common reasons:

- Lack of skill; not knowing how
- Not taking the time to think through what one wants to say
- Not taking the time to anticipate what another person might be thinking and feeling
- Fear of revealing too much of oneself
- Being afraid of another person's anger
- Not wanting to hurt another person's feelings

Four Key Listening Skills

Listening skills are the building blocks of effective communication. These skills enable you to demonstrate that you are interested in what the other person has to say, as well as hearing and understanding the other person. Four key listening skills are open-ended questions, summary statements, reflective statements, and neutral questions and phrases. They are easy to learn with a little practice.

Open-ended questions begin with *what, why, how do, or tell me.*

- These questions get the other person to open up and elaborate on the topic.
- Asking these kinds of questions gets the other person involved by giving him or her a chance to tell what they think or know.
- These questions are designed to encourage the other person to talk.
- They are useful when the other person is silent, or reluctant to elaborate.
- They are also useful in dealing with negative emotions (such as anger or fear), since they help encourage the other person to vent feelings.

Examples of open-ended questions:

“How do you feel about what she said?”

“Tell me all about this new project.”

“What do you think about the new offices?”

Summary statements sum up what you hear the other person is saying.

- A summary statement enhances the other person's self-esteem by showing that you were listening carefully.
- It also helps you focus on facts, not emotions.
- It helps the other person clarify his or her own thinking by hearing your summary.

- Summary statements also help you deal with multiple disagreements so you can deal with them one by one.
- They help eliminate confusion by focusing on the relevant facts.
- Summary statements also help you separate the important issues from the trivial.

Examples of summary statements:

“So you’re saying you want to go to the library and the bookstore before you decide which books you need. Then you want to go over your choices with me.”

“You’re saying that you tried your best on this homework assignment, but it was beyond your control.”

Reflective statements rephrase what you heard the person say and reflect it back.

- A reflective statement is a way of demonstrating that you were listening carefully.
- It shows the other person that you take them seriously and want to understand what they are feeling.
- It helps you clarify whether you understand what the other person is saying and feeling.

Examples of reflective statements:

“You feel sad because your mother has to leave so soon after such a good visit.”

“You’re feeling upset because I was late again.”

“You sound frustrated that you won’t be able to finish the project on time.”

Neutral questions and phrases get the other person to open up and elaborate on the topic you are discussing.

- These questions are more focused than open-ended questions.
- They help the other person understand what you are interested in hearing more about.
- They further communication because they help you gain more information.
- When you ask these kinds of questions, you demonstrate to the other person that you are interested and that you are listening.

Examples of neutral questions and phrases:

“Give me some more reasons why we should buy the computer now rather than in January.”

“Tell me more about why you want to take this job.”

Try Your Hand at Using Listening Skills

Here are some common life situations where good listening skills would come in handy. Read each one and think about which of the four listening skills would help the most. Write an example of what you could say to the other person to validate his or her feelings and encourage further expression of emotion. Check your answers with those on the back page of this newsletter.

1. Your spouse returns from an important business trip. He is very quiet. When you ask him how the trip went, he shrugs his shoulders and says, “Okay.”
Which listening skill would be effective in this situation?

What could you say?

2. Your coworker says, "I really wish I didn't have to go to that conference next week. I know I have to, but I wish I could get out of it somehow. I don't like traveling, I hate being away from my family, and I resent having to spend time kissing up to those field people!"
Which listening skill would be effective in this situation?

What could you say?

3. "I wish I could just stay home and garden today," your spouse says.

Which listening skill would be effective in this situation?

What could you say?

4. You are 20 minutes late to pick up your son for a soccer game. There was no way you could let him know you were going to be late. When you arrive, he opens the car door and glares at you. He growls, "I thought you'd be on time for once!"

Which listening skill would be effective in this situation?

What could you say?

5. Your business partner wants to stay in your present office space, which you have outgrown. You want to look for a bigger place. She says, "It makes me so nervous to make such a big commitment! And what if we don't like it in the new place? I think we should just stay where we are."

Which listening skill would be effective in this situation?

What could you say?

Suggested Answers to Listening Skills Exercise

Lots of different listening skills would be effective in each of the five situations. Here are some suggested answers:

1. Open-ended question: "Why don't you tell me about it?"
2. Reflective statement: "You sound frustrated and upset about having to go to the conference."
3. Reflective statement: "You really love gardening because it's so relaxing."
4. Reflective statement: "You are really upset with me for being late, aren't you?"
5. Summary statement: "You're afraid that we'll be in over our heads and will think it's a mistake."