A Guide to Active Listening

# A few thoughts about listening before speaking from the proverbial sections of the Bible:

* James 1:19-20 - My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.
* Proverbs 18:2 - Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.
* Proverbs 18:13 - To answer before listening—that is folly and shame
* Proverbs 29:20 - Do you see someone who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for them.
* Proverbs 10:19 - Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.

The below information is taken and adapted *heavily* from <https://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/healthy-communication/the-skill-of-listening/>

# What is Active Listening

Listening to people and truly hearing their emotional state is a wonderful way to love well. Listening is not about fixing problems or solving issues, but communicating love and care. This is true of all relationships, whether as allies, parents, friends, or whatever.

* By **listening to them**, you are communicating that they are worthy of your attention.
* By **hearing their distress**, you are demonstrating that their distress is real and affecting them.
* By **allowing them time to decide their course of action**, you are indicating your trust in their ability to solve problems.

Active listening is a specific form of communication that lets another person know that you are “with them,” aware of what they are saying, accepting of their perspective, and appreciative of their situation.  

**Really listening is the best way to create a caring relationship** in which the other person see you as being “in their corner” and as a base to which they can always return when they need support.   
   
Acceptance is key

When you are active listening, there is **no judgment or evaluation** of what the speaker is saying.  Often people resist at this point, thinking that Active Listening implies that you are agreeing with whatever is being said. But **accepting is not the same as agreeing**.

For example, someone may declare angrily, “I was the only one not invited to the surprise party.” While you may know this statement to be untrue, you can accept that the speaker feels left out by saying, “You are upset that you weren’t included.”

Had you countered the statement with “I know so and so wasn’t invited either,” you may have gotten into an argument over someone’s social status or the accuracy of the statement.  By accepting the speaker’s view, you free him up to focus on his own feelings, perhaps even clarifying his own thoughts. “I wasn’t invited and I think it’s because I’m not wanted.”

**Acceptance is the heart and soul of Active Listening**. It is not the time to object, teach, help solve a problem, or ask a ton of questions.  This is a time to let others talk without interruptions or judgment, while you listen to what they have to say.

To give two examples:

* Read Psalm 142 – This is a **huge** complaint given to God and there is no rebuke from God or even expectation that he would rebuke for expressing that
* In John 11, when her brother Lazarus had died and Jesus showed up, Martha says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That’s a highly emotional complaint against Jesus, to which he does not rebuke at all.

## Practice makes perfect

Active listening is a very sophisticated skill that can take years to master.

Because you may not have been raised in a home in which this kind of listening was practiced and because very little of it occurs in our fast-paced, solution-oriented society, it can **feel like you are learning a second language**.

It is no wonder that when you first begin to practice this skill, it can feel forced, unnatural, and uncomfortable.

### EXAMPLES

To get a feel for Active Listening, read the following three scenarios which show how three different parents could respond to the same situation that their 10-year-old daughter wants to discuss.

As you read, please think about how the parent and the child are feeling and how the parent’s responses affect the relationship between them.

#### Scenario 1:

**Speaker:** (sounding glum) I want to quit my job. It’s boring.  
   
**Friend:** (said roughly) Of course you don’t want to quit your job. You need it to be financially stable! You need to learn to like it. You don’t have a choice, you know. Everyone has to work. Everyone has to do things they don’t want to do and you are no different.

*This friend seemed annoyed, angry, and impatient, and didn’t want to hear that the speaker hated their job.  The speaker felt that the friend wasn’t listening to her and would eventually learn not to turn to this friend for support.*

#### Scenario 2:

**Speaker:** (sounding glum) I want to quit my job. It’s boring.  
   
**Friend:** (sugary) Oh, that’s awful.  No job should be boring.  You are so intelligent, you need a lot of exciting things going on to keep your interest. I’m going to just call up your boss—I know him well—and tell him you need more challenging work.  
   
*This friend jumped right in with praise for the speaker and a solution to the problem.  The friend seemed unable to tolerate anything that might make the friend unhappy.  The speaker didn’t want the friend’s intervention.*

#### Scenario 3:

**Speaker:** (sounding glum) I want to quit my job. It’s boring.  
   
**Friend:** (said roughly) I can understand that. It’s tough to find joy in jobs. It must be hard to want to keep showing up each day when it’s so boring.

*This friend did not get angry and didn’t jump in with solutions.  Instead, the friend listened without judging, accepted was said, and left room for additional depth and sharing.*

# The Basics of Active Listening

## Why is Active Listening Difficult?

There are certain attitudes you need when you actively listen to others and these are sometimes hard to understand about ourselves.

* You may have your own agendas for how you want their situations resolved.
* You may feel uncomfortable when people you care about are experiencing something unpleasant.
* You may not like when they have certain negative or painful feelings.
* You may have a hard time separating your feelings from theirs.

## Necessary Attitudes

With time being a valuable commodity in your busy life, easy and quick solutions may be desirable, and taking the time to listen may seem like an inconvenient chore.  But it is important to strive to achieve the following attitudes:

* **Accept the feelings and perceptions of your friend.**  
  They are real for him, even if you do not agree with them.
* **Be objective and keep your feelings separate from your friend’s.**  
  Use your knowledge about your friend to intuit what his feelings might be.
* **Allow your friend to be responsible for his own feelings.**  
  Stay separate from his experience.
* **Have the necessary time.**  
  Stop what you are doing to give your friend your full attention when he needs to talk to you. That means putting down the phone and being fully engaged, making eye contact and responding when appropriate.
* **Recognize that feelings are often transitory.**  
  Often, once a friend is able to vent his feelings, they lose their intensity and he is able to move on quickly.  This allows your friend to be more able to focus on solutions.
* **Let the exchange go only as far as your friend wants it to.**  
  Don’t push him to continue to talk after he seems satisfied or wants to stop.
* **Allow your friend to draw his own conclusions.**  
  Be patient.
* **Do not have some specific result in mind.**  
  It is easy to say of an active listening exchange that “It didn’t work,” meaning that no solution or the solution the friend had in mind was not achieved.

However, **the real goal of active listening is for the speaker to feel heard and have a safe place to vent and talk, and for the relationship between the speaker and listener to be deepened.**

Sometimes, there is not any way to “fix” the situation, but, just by listening, your friend knows that at least one person in the world cares about him and is on his side.

**Active Listening is a great tool when you:**

* sense**strong feelings** on the part of your friend.
* think that your friend **needs to vent** emotions, **feel understood**, or have an opportunity to **clarify his thoughts** by talking with an accepting person.
* **are not involved personally** in the situation – the situation is not your problem and you can stay separate and objective.

## Active Listening would NOT be appropriate when:

* your friend **needs information**, not someone to listen to him. For example, if your friend asks what time a certain meeting is. Just answer his question.
* your friend is more in **need of reassurance, praise or correction**. Obviously, if your friend is about to do something potentially dangerous or self-harming, you would not say: “You’re really angry right now, aren’t you?”  Rather, you would take action; you can listen to how angry they are after a safe situation has been found.
* you feel resistance and **your friend does not want to talk**.  At times like that, you can say, “*I’m here for you whenever you do want to talk.”*
* you have some **investment in the outcome** of the situation or any decision your friend makes.
* you have strong feelings on the subject so **you cannot remain objective** and separate.
* **you are too needy yourself** or feel too drained to give the time and energy needed to focus on your friend.  Don’t force yourself. It is better to be honest that you are too tired to give your friend your full attention than to be distracted and have him misinterpret your response as a lack of caring.

Remember that Active Listening is one of the most important gifts you can give people. It can help you create a very special and supportive bond. If you are non-judgmental and accepting of what is on their minds, they will feel more comfortable opening up to you and will have a trustworthy place where they can explore their reactions and feelings.

By becoming a safe haven for others, they will see you as someone they can turn to in difficult situations, even when facing difficult and complicated life choices.

# How Do Your Really Listen?

Listening involves **paying full attention to what your friend has to say.**

It means turning off the running dialog that goes on in your head – the one where you are so busy thinking about all the things you need to do or should be doing or you are so busy thinking of the perfect response to your friend that you miss half of what they are saying to you.

If you are too busy at the moment to listen, then you can set another time or get help from your support group.

It is important that you keep your commitment and don’t get involved in another activity. You want to communicate to your friend that he is important and that you care about his thoughts, feelings, and struggles.

# Five different ways to Listen Actively

## Non-verbal Active Listening

A non-verbal listening response involves little or no verbal activity, but you **show attentiveness by nodding and making facial expressions** in response to statements. Non-verbal responses also include such ‘comments’ as “I see” or “Uh hum.”

Through body language, you can convey to them that you are interested in what they have to say and are willing to take the time to listen.

You set aside what you are doing, establish eye contact or lean forward to indicate you are listening, and don’t answer the phone or look at your mobile device.

These non-verbal responses can be represented by watching a movie at the theater – in which you are watching and listening and attending, but not speaking.

## Content Response

A content listening response **reflects back to your friend the content of what you heard**.  This should be a paraphrase and not a parroting, which can be annoying and can sound false.

These Content Responses can be represented by a mirror because you are reflecting back what the speaker has said to you.

## Feeling Response

A feeling listening response **focuses on the emotions you think the speaker might be experiencing.**  Notice the word “think” – the tone for any Active Listening response is usually tentative, almost as if it ended with a question mark, as if you are checking with the speaker that you accurately picked up the feeling underlying the words.

A caution: While it is important to allow sharing feelings, if recounting the story over and over seems to escalate their emotions – rather than help dissipate them – you need to stop the rant.

For example, “I know how upset you are.  I think you need to take some time to calm down and then we can talk some more.”

## Clarifying Response

A clarifying listening response takes a much **broader or deeper view of the situation** the speaker is facing, offers other possible reactions and identifies potential needs, values, expectations, wishes, and underlying issues.

Clarifying Responses can be represented by a calculator which helps someone to process information.

## Universal Truth Response

When you use a universal truth listening response with the speaker, you are offering a broad commentary about the situation that reflects their needs, feelings, or experience.  Often these responses are **ways to represent a principle about life that relates to the situation** and their reactions to it.

Such statements can give food for thought as far as processing the situation and can help them to feel less alone.  After all, you are saying that others have walked in their shoes and gone before them.   Making your statement in the third person makes it seem more objective.

# Five Healthy Non-Listening Responses

There are five responses that are **healthy and appropriate at certain times, but they are not active listening.** There is definitely a time and place for the following responses; but since they are not Active Listening responses, they will **not necessarily help the speaker to explore a situation and come to their own decisions about how to handle it.**  These can cut off discussions.

And they do not necessarily enhance your relationship with the speaker in the same way that Active Listening can, encouraging closeness, respect and ultimately, independence.

Below are the common traps that people fall into when trying to listen well.

## Reassuring

You want to promise that it will all be okay in the end, it’s not such a big deal, and things will work out for the best. While their problems may seem small and easily rectified to you, they don’t seem so to the speaker.

**By reassuring your children too quickly, you minimize the problem and stop the conversation.**

You want to tell your children that they are fully capable of handling the situation.  But if they are not convinced they can, your reassurance can feel like you are discounting the situation. It is as if you are saying that whatever the problem is, it is not so bad.

Examples of statements meant to reassure:

“It’s going to be all right soon, I’m sure.”

“You can do it.”

“It’s going to be all right soon. You’ll be fine.”

## Explaining

You may want to fill in the gaps and explain why another person behaved the way he did. While quite useful and important, these explanations fall under the category of teaching – an important part of true relationships, but not part of active listening.

This form of communication tends to **place the focus on the situation, not on the speaker,** their experiences, or their reactions.  It suggests they consider things at an intellectual level rather than a feeling level.

Examples of statements meant to explain:

“The reason this might have happened is…”

## Suggesting

It is uncomfortable to watch others struggle, especially when the solutions to their problems are quite clear to you. However, if you move into that mode too quickly, **the speaker does not feel heard and usually rejects any of your attempts to help.**

This form of communication also moves the conversation into an action mode.  It denies the importance of sorting out and processing feelings.  It may tell the speaker that they are not capable of handling the situation, and that you know best.

Examples of statements meant to solve:

“A way to handle this is…”

“Have you thought about trying to…?”

## Sharing

Sometimes you want the speaker to know that you have been through the same thing that they are experiencing and that you survived. You want them to know that you understand how they feel.

Your intentions are good; however, once again, if you share too early in the process, you **take the focus off the speaker’s experience and onto yourself.** The speaker won’t feel heard.

While you may be trying to say: *“See how much I understand,”* your sharing usually changes the direction of the conversation.  It can be hard for your children to shift back to talking about themselves.

Examples of statements meant to share:

“I know just how you feel.  Once that happened to me…”

## Questioning

The speaker can come in upset and you want to understand what is happening. Frequently the story being recounted is disjointed or is told in such detail that you have difficulty understanding what the problem is. It is tempting to jump in with your own questions to clarify the situation, to speed up the process, or to get to what you believe are the important facts.

This form of communication can interrupt the process in several ways: it makes the speaker accountable to answer your questions; it can **change the direction the conversation would have taken if the speaker were following their own train of thought**; and it makes them move from a feeling mode to a thinking mode.

Examples of statements that ask questions:

“Why did you do that?”

“How do you feel about that?”

“How often does it happen?”

“What happened first?”

“Why didn’t you walk away?”

You can actually learn a lot just by listening to what they do include.  You can discover what information they value. Do they talk about feelings or facts? Do they talk about others’ perspectives or just their own? Can they see the big picture or do they get bogged down in the details?

There is definitely an **important place for each of these five responses, depending on timing, the situation, and the needs of the speaker.**

But remember, when you want the speaker to talk, when you sense they have strong feelings, the most effective way to help them is to use the skill of Active Listening first.  You can employ these other techniques later.

# Fine Tuning your Active Listening

## Underlying Issues

When Active Listening, it is helpful to know that at any given time or in any given situation, there are **broad issues beneath the surface of the speaker’s words or reactions that reflect feelings, needs, or concerns.** Yet they can color interactions and affect behavior even when they are not spoken, understood or realized.

**These issues are universal but are expressed through different behaviors by different people at different times in their lives**.

## Recognize when an Underlying Issue is Involved

Often **when people have a disproportionately intense reaction,** it means that the situation has triggered feelings around some underlying issue.

Or when a **reaction seems to have little or no connection to the actual situation** or behavior, it may be that the speaker is reacting to something else, a larger and deeper issue than what is happening in the present.

Knowing this can help you manage the situation more effectively and help the speaker to identify the issue so that they can more appropriately manage the situation.

Recognizing Underlying Issues is an important skill in Active Listening, since you can incorporate the issue into your response, giving the speaker an opportunity to identify what is really causing their emotions or behaviors. But it takes *a lot* of time to get to the point that you know them and their story well enough to even begin broaching those issues. **Be patient.**

## Recognize your own Underlying Issues

As a friend and listener, **you have your own underlying issues which effect how you respond** to a situation; you may also over-react because whatever is happening in the present is triggering some underlying issue for you of which you may not be aware.

By clarifying your own issues, you can **better monitor your reactions and acknowledge for yourself that you are dealing with more than just the present situation.** This can diffuse the intensity of the reaction, allow you to deal more appropriately with the situation at hand, and consider your own underlying issues at another time.

For example, if you had an argument with your sister about the care of your aging parents, you may be impatient and irritable with the speaker when they ask want to be heard. If you can keep in mind that you are preoccupied with these other concerns, you may be able to respond to your children in the present, and confront your own issues separately.