

Improving Your Listening Abilities to Boost Your Communication Skills

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Good listening skills are important to a relationship. Although most people have heard of "active listening", the definition of active listening is a source of confusion for many people. Sometimes called "reflective listening", active listening involves making sure that you heard what was said by repeating it back. Consciously listening to the other person to make sure that you heard what they actually said is reflected in these various terms.

Active listening is one of the first things that you need to learn to change how you communicate with your spouse. Many times, the core of the communicational problems lie with listening.

You cannot effectively communicate with your significant others if you cannot accurately "hear" what is being said. There is no effective communication without effective listening. Without good communication skills, there is no effective problem solving skills.

An absence of effectively listening means that the message sent or intended is not the same message as the one received by the listener. Although this may happen for a lot of reasons, a simple absence of listening is a major culprit.

A number of things can get in the way of good listening including assumptions that tells the listener that s/he does not need to listen past a certain point, a failure to pay attention or succumbing to distractions, and rehearsing what your response will be. The listener may assume that he/she knows what the other is going to say, and may thus attend to just enough of the message to confirm his/her belief. At other times, a listener may be tuning out what the other person is saying while s/he tries to come with his or her rebuttal. Both of these scenarios are setups for the condition where couples dig themselves in deeper and deeper trying to be understood and not realizing that neither is hearing what is actually said.

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What often appears to be focus or attention difficulties are merely lack of listening. Partners fail to listen deliberately or non-deliberately. To listen well, follow these suggestions:

1. Pay close attention to what is going on.
2. Concentrate on what they are saying.
3. Maintain eye contact without staring.
4. Don't interrupt.
5. Don't worry about what you are going to say until s/he is finished.
6. Practice active listening.

Perceptual "[filters](#)" color your intake of information in your interactions and in your environment. These filters are made up of your own experiences, beliefs, attitudes, mood states, and relationship events. Your filters are uniquely your own. Events that have had the greatest influence on current filters tend to be hardest to eliminate. Active listening assists couples in "neutralizing" some of the impact of those filters and allows for more accurate perception in the present.

You can improve your ability to listen by practicing reflective listening. You can begin to override your filters by using this technique and by looking at the assumptions that you have been making about what is being said and looking for patterns. Some people have filters about abandonment fears. Others are ultra-sensitive to criticism.

The phrase, "What I hear you saying is...." is one example of an active listening technique. Other clarifying questions could serve as active listening. When you clarify a message, you are trying to confirm that the message sent and the message received is the same message.

Sometimes the process can still get derailed when the paraphrased "what I heard you saying" message is met with "that is not what I said", and then an argument ensues over which one is correct. Couples get derailed by arguing about what was actually said or not said in the first place. This is easily remedied by each person first and foremost 's messages. It helps to not concern yourself about who is right and who is wrong. A good phrase to remember for this situation is, "actually, what I intended to say was..."

Reflective listening feels awkward, unnatural, odd, stiff, and just plain weird. It does however, have a number of benefits that make it worth practicing and learning. Some of those are the fact that you can eliminate most of your arguments by making sure that the message that is received is the one that was sent.

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Another is the fact that by carefully clarifying messages, you can discover your own themes in filters that color how you take in the contemporary events in your life. Once you identify your sensitivity to certain messages and themes, some of the power of those filters can be neutralized. If you know that you are sensitive to abandonment messages, you don't have to panic when your partner says, "I'm starting to get angry in this discussion. I'm going to take a break and go to the store." In the past, instead of hearing that, you might have heard "I'm mad at you and I'm leaving you". If you have identified abandonment fear as a filter and your partner leaves in the middle of an argument, you can reassure yourself that your partner did not say that s/he was leaving you forever.

When you can actually hear what is being said in your conversations, you are less likely to engage in circular arguing, with each volley of verbal assaults setting up more miscommunication.

Communication exercises and training that have an active listening component (e.g. The Honey Jar) are especially helpful.

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"The Honey Jar" is a conversation starter for couples. It consists of 250 sentence stems, each one serving as an open-ended prompt to generate discussion. The Honey Jar is more than a jar of sentence stems. The Honey Jar was field tested by real couples for therapeutic value. It can assist couples in restoring a sense of self-confidence in re-establishing their connection and commitment. As couples use their time, attention and willingness to take risks with each other, a close, loving connection can re-emerge.

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