

Learning to Listen Well For Good Relationship Skills

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

"You just don't listen" is one of the most frequent complaints I hear couples level at each other. This accusation can be a reflection of feeling ignored or discounted, but it can also mean "you don't understand what I am saying", or "I'm not getting what I want from talking to you."

Whatever the meaning, it reflects the reality that the way that these two people are trying to communicate is not working for them. There is more than good listening skills to effective communication, but effective listening is the cornerstone of good communication. Effective listening is crucial to effective communication and inevitably to effective problem solving. You can't have effective communication without effective listening skills.

Sometimes when couples are unable to problem solve, there is a general absence of listening. 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, the lack of listening is a major culprit. It is difficult to pay attention and listen when you are assuming that you know what the other is going to say. You may attend to just enough of the message to confirm your beliefs. This is often the case when couples dig themselves in deeper and deeper trying to be understood and not realizing that neither is hearing what is actually said.

To be a good listener, practice these active listening behaviors:

1. Give the other person permission to tell you whatever it is they are trying to say. This involves not talking while the other is talking. You can't listen and talk at the same time.
2. Turn off the television, phones, and other distractions. The other person knows that you are interested in what they are saying because they have your undivided attention.
3. Look at them. Keep eye contact. Be patient. Don't mind-read, fortune-tell, or finish their sentences. Don't interrupt or distract them.
4. Communicate an attitude of acceptance and patience through your non-verbals.
5. Above all, active listening involves reflective listening. Check out the message with something like, "what I hear you saying is....."

This technique is especially crucial when trying to problem-solve. When you reflect back what you heard and it doesn't match what the other person said or meant to say, they have an opportunity to correct it. If you still don't understand, ask for further clarification, without challenging the person's position or feelings. Active listening goes a long way to restoring or building effective communication skills. If you want to be understood and accepted by a significant other, work hard to understand and accept them. To understand another person you have to listen to them.

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