

# Learning to Listen Well for Good Relationship Skills

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

One of the most recurring refrains couples direct at each other is, "Why can't you hear me? You just don't listen!" It's a timeless lament that holds profound significance. It's not just about feeling overlooked or undervalued; it can also signify, "You don't grasp what I'm saying," or "I'm not getting what I need from our conversations."

Whatever the specific complaint may be, it underscores the undeniable truth that their chosen mode of communication isn't hitting the mark. While effective communication encompasses many skills, proficient listening remains the bedrock of any meaningful exchange.

Effective listening anchors an effective communication skill set. Often, when people struggle to solve problems, it's due to a deficiency in genuine listening. The "intended message" isn't quite the same as the "message received" by the listener. There are many reasons for this discrepancy (many of which are discussed in other articles on this page).

Underdeveloped listening skills are a significant contribution to miscommunication. Commonly, as one party assumes they already know what the other will say, the listener pays just enough attention to validate their preconceived notions. This scenario often leads to misconnection, misunderstanding, and poor comprehension. If we are not using mindful or reflective listening, we are probably tuning out a substantial amount of information aimed at us. To become a proficient listener, one must master the art of active listening.

To become a better listener, increase your awareness of your individual cognitive distortions that change information as it comes in. To get to know yourself better, use mindfulness, journaling, and other self-knowledge tools

to become better aware of what you bring to a conversation as a receiver of information.

Setting the stage for effective listening is very important. Pay attention. Watch out for becoming distracted by your internal and external environments. Examples of external environments might include kids pulling on your clothes saying, "Mommy, mommy!", the television playing in the background, the neighbor walking his dog on your side of the street, or the text coming in on your cellphone. The variety of external distractions is limitless. Internal distractions, such as triggered emotional responses, preparing rebuttals, tuning out for any reason, or your mind wandering to your shopping list, are all examples of how attempts to listen to others can get so easily derailed.

To return to focused listening when derailed, try to recall what they just said. To let the other person know you are paying attention, use gestures and body language that demonstrate your engagement, such as brief nodding, verbal affirmations like 'I see,' repeating the last few words, or highlighting a specific detail of their concept or message. These communication behaviors also help maintain your attention and engagement. Asking questions conveys a deeper level of engagement. When you consciously and deliberately reduce distractions to listen to the other person, you are telling them that they and their information are important to you.

There are many benefits of active listening. We all want to feel like we belong, that others are interested in us, and that when we talk with others, they listen. When you wonder whether the other person is listening to what you are saying or whether they understand it, you may question whether it is worth your time and energy to continue to communicate. Effective listening helps with productivity and problem-solving skills. We can avoid more misunderstandings, convey connection and regard for the other person, and have more impact in our interactions.

To employ active listening techniques like "What I hear you saying is....," it necessitates personal reflection. Sometimes, what we believed we heard wasn't actually said or wasn't the intended message. Our unique life

experiences influence both what we hear and how we express ourselves. These cognitive distortions can hinder non-judgmental listening. If you genuinely want to grasp the other person's message, avoid becoming entangled in your own filters, including judgments about their communication skills or hidden motives. In cases of confusion, use clarifying questions such as "What does that mean?" or "Do you mean \_\_\_\_\_?" and embrace their clarifications. It's advisable to refrain from challenging them with your interpretation of their true intentions.

To continue to improve your listening skills, frequently encourage others to share their thoughts and feelings. Show your interest by minimizing internal and external distractions, and by attentively observing their words and body language. Demonstrate that you're engaged in the conversation through active or reflective listening without interruptions. Exercise patience and focus on understanding them rather than making yourself understood. Keep in mind that we all desire importance and acceptance. When you invest time and effort in understanding others through active listening, you'll likely find that they become more interested in listening to you in return.



Elevate your journey of improving listening skills by incorporating The Honey Jar into your daily routine. Whether you're in the early stages of getting to know your partner or have been together for a while and feel like you've exhausted conversation topics, The Honey Jar is your solution. It consists of a collection of neutral conversation prompts designed to kickstart and sustain meaningful communication between couples.

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