

THE ART OF UNDERSTANDING

STEVEN G. RISE, PHD, LCSW-R

Active listening, or showing others that you understand them, is the most important step in the interactive dance of communication. Very often, during an emotional moment, two people are desperately trying to get their points across to each other and neither is actually listening; or one person is going on and the other is tuning him or her out. The way out of this dilemma is the listening paradox: When you most want someone to hear you, it helps to listen *first!*

Active Listening Tools

True listening is a form of meditation in which you clear your mind of your own thoughts and put your attention entirely on another person. This is extremely validating because when the second person feels they are being heard, they feel respected, ergo less defensive. The following steps help build the concentration necessary for active listening:

- Make eye contact, nods of understanding, and give verbal cues of affirmation, such as, “*hmm,*” “*I understand,*” “*Oh, I see,*” “*I am sorry.*” When you appear disinterested, people talk on and on, desperately trying to gain your attention, usually raising the volume of their words to be heard. Focusing on the speaker shortens monologues by helping the speaker see you are listening.
- Rephrase what you are hearing or the mirroring technique. “*I hear you say ____, am I accurate?*” It is better to restate what you heard in different words from what you heard than to simply repeat. This helps clarify the other person’s point. Ask questions if you don’t fully understand what has been said: “*What do you mean by ____?*” Keep inquiring the accuracy of what you are repeating back so you make sure you stay on the right track. Keep rephrasing until the other person feels completely understood.
- Label feelings: “*Do you feel __?*” “*You seem to feel __.*” Until emotions are defined, people tend to feel frustrated and keep them internalized. Once feelings are identified, people can let them go because they are now on the conscious level. Highly accurate responses can draw out a disproportionate level of emotions and tears because those strong feelings are usually connected to a theme. Releasing such emotions deepens the connection between two people and takes communication to a more intimate level (especially when accompanied by a touch, pat, or hug). When people are irate, identify any hurt their anger may be masking.
- Validate feelings: “*To me, it makes sense that you feel __ because __.*” Validating the factors that contribute to a feeling requires curiosity. The more irrational an emotion seems, the more intriguing it is to discover the cause. When you understand the “emotional logic” behind a feeling, it starts to make sense: “*I can see why you are disappointed in me, since you don’t approve of women wearing short skirts.*” Feelings are not right or wrong, but are the result of helpful or

harmful beliefs. Validating shows that you are not making judgments and helps others be less defensive or attacking.

It is far easier to make judgments and sneak in your own viewpoint than to listen. Examine the following comments carefully to find their hidden agenda: “You wanted to run away instead of trying”; “You think I can’t ever change even though I’m listening now”; “You shouldn’t feel so responsible.”

The examples in the following table show that in an emotional moment either person can turn conflict into true communication:

Speaker's Comment	Active Listening Responses		
	Rephrase	Label Feelings	Validate
1. How can I ever trust you to work out our problems when you left for two days?	You think if things get tense again, I won't be able to handle it and I'll leave.	The idea of trusting me seems to make you feel more worried and anxious.	I can see why you would not trust me until I show you that I can be different.
2. I left because our argument was so bad, I thought it would get physical.	You thought the wisest thing to do was leave and not chance the possibility of a fight.	The idea that we might physically fight must have been really scary for you.	It makes sense that when I pushed you, you were afraid you might strike back.
3. If you think I'm going to do my homework now, you're nuts.	You think that this is a very poor time to do your assignment.	Are you resentful that I'm asking you to do homework when we have company?	I can see why you would feel left out when everyone else is having a good time.
4. You never listen to me—You just try to fix me.	What do you mean when you say I try to "fix" you?	You get frustrated when I think for you and give you solutions.	It makes sense that you want me to hear your ideas instead of giving you mine.
5. I have to do something to help you when you complain so much!	You think that if you don't help me, I'll never feel better.	You must feel a lot of pressure when I get upset.	People have always counted on you, so I can see why you take over.

Although these examples demonstrate the tremendous improvement that can take place in communication with active listening, they may bring up some concerns:

- Active listening sounds so artificial! This is true. Feeding back, labeling feelings, and validating are learned responses. Reassuring, explaining, and insulting come from animal instinct and do not have to be taught. They are generally the worst things to do during an emotional moment because hurt people hurt people.
- Of course, you do not have to use active listening every time someone talks to you. Disagreeing and advising can make everyday banter fun and challenging. It is only

during emotional moments, when you notice tension, that it is essential to switch gears and become an active listener to ensure there will be no misinterpretation of misunderstanding.

- Will I ever get a chance to speak? When you carefully listen without inserting your views, other people become curious about where you stand. Surprisingly, you will remember your own issues even though you've just put them out of your mind. However, your concerns may diminish when you thoroughly understand the other person's position.

Trying to get your point across without thoroughly understanding other people is like venturing into enemy territory without first doing reconnaissance work. Your power comes from understanding others—not from being understood!