

# How 'Active Listening' Makes Both Participants in a Conversation Feel Better

Use Body Language and Verbal Cues to Encourage the Person Talking and Prevent Listener Burnout



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Why is it so hard to listen to our loved ones sometimes? You can learn 'active

listening' skills that will help both parties feel better about a conversation.  
Corbis

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When Traci Ruble and her husband, Clemens Gantert, climbed into bed one night recently, he began telling her about his day at his software startup. He explained that changes in a state law would affect his business. And he told her about a technical problem he was having with a security certificate for the software.

After several minutes, Ms. Ruble turned to look at him. Then she burst out laughing, picked up the remote and turned on the TV. "Whatever you are saying is like speaking Greek to me," said Ms. Ruble, who is a marriage and family therapist.

"I can't believe you get paid to listen for a living," Mr. Gantert replied, calling her on her behavior.

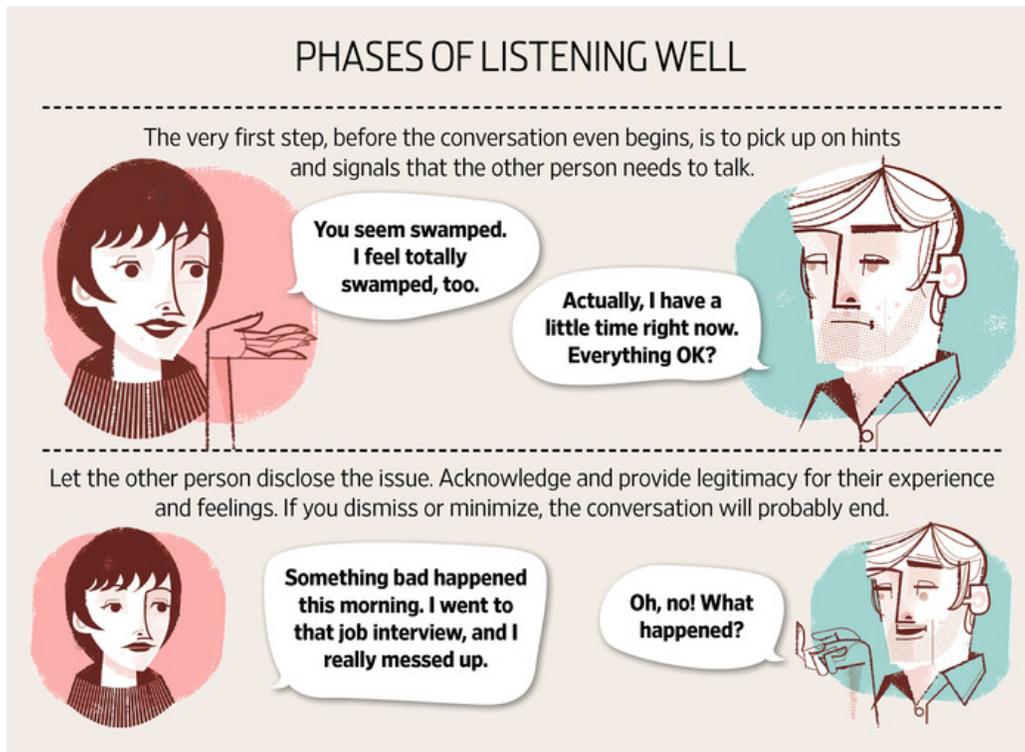
Why is it so hard to listen to our loved ones?

Experts say we're naturally just not good at listening for a whole range of reasons. We have a tendency to swap stories, so we interrupt. We're uncomfortable with emotions, so we avoid focusing too closely on someone else's. We'd rather talk about ourselves, so we rush the talker along.

And there's something relationship researchers call "listener burnout." We've all endured someone's endless droning on and on, often about the same old problems. When we offer quick advice or suggest ways to fix the situation, we may be unconsciously trying to protect ourselves from burnout.

"Good listeners overcome their natural inclination to fix the other's problems and to keep the conversation brief," says Graham D. Bodie, an associate professor of communication studies at Louisiana State University, who

studies listening.



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The first two of five phases of active listening. Scotty Reifsnyder

It's not as easy as it sounds. Practice "active listening," a term experts use to describe the way you listen when you are an engaged presence in the conversation, fully in the moment with the other person, not just sitting there, half paying attention.

Think of the different ways you can listen to music. You can put it on in the background while you're doing something else. Or you can put on your headphones, give it your undivided attention and really notice how it affects you. That is active listening.

To actively listen to a person, you will need to master certain behaviors—some verbal, some nonverbal—that signal your interest. Researchers call these "immediacy behaviors."

Start by putting your phone away and turning off the TV. Sit close to and lean toward your loved one. Let your facial expressions reflect what he or she is saying. Be sure to make eye contact. (Your mother was right when she said, “Look at me when I am talking.”)

You are sending an unspoken message: “You have my attention. I am here for you.” You also will need to signal this verbally.

Legitimize the other person’s feelings by reflecting them back: “That must have been stressful for you.” Draw the other person out by asking open-ended questions: “How did that make you feel?” “What are you going to do now?”

Use short words or even sounds such as “yep,” “right,” “mmm hmm”—all known as “minimal encouragers”—to urge them to continue. Periodically paraphrase what your loved one is saying, and follow the paraphrase with something researchers call the “checkout”: “Am I understanding you correctly?”

“Active listening starts with the real desire to help another person think through their feelings,” says Dr. Bodie. It takes time. “Don’t try to fix the problem right out of the gate, and don’t rush things,” he says.

Dr. Bodie was the lead researcher in a study published online this month in the *Western Journal of Communication* that looked at the efficacy of the immediacy behaviors that make up active listening. The researchers divided 342 people into pairs, then asked one person in each pair, the “discloser,” to describe a recent stressful event, such as a health issue, relationship problem or work setback. They videotaped the interactions and counted how many times the listener did each of various immediacy behaviors. Then they asked the discloser to rate the listener on how well he or she listened, and how much better he or she made the discloser feel.

Encourage the other person to elaborate. Ask open-ended questions. Use verbal cues to show you want to hear the whole story. Lean forward. Make eye contact.



I prepped for four hours last night, and I made notes of all my recent projects. But I just couldn't concentrate. I kept yawning!

I couldn't remember what to say. It was like my brain was frozen. I'm so discouraged.

Oh, dear. Did you feel like you were getting sick? Did you get enough sleep?



Show you heard what the other person said by paraphrasing and using a verbal 'checkout.'



So you stayed up late, you got up early, and you couldn't concentrate—is that right?



Continue asking questions and listening so you can collaborate together on possible solutions.



Yes, I am exhausted. I'm not sleeping well, and I feel totally run down. I'm getting nowhere.

Hmmm. Let's think. Do you feel qualified for the jobs you are interviewing for? Or is there some other kind of work you'd rather focus on?



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The other three phases of active listening. Scotty Reifsnnyder

Overall, when the listener displayed more of the behaviors—making eye contact, paraphrasing, asking open-ended questions—the talker perceived the listener as more emotionally aware, and felt better. The verbal behaviors, on average, were three times as likely as nonverbal behaviors to produce this outcome.

Another thing the findings suggest, Dr. Bodie says, is that a listener can be

just as helpful on the phone as in person.

A number of studies suggest that while men and women are equally likely to be good listeners, women tend to be held to a higher standard, Dr. Bodie says. A man who isn't listening well isn't as surprising as a woman who is a poor listener. Culturally, we expect her to be better, he says.

As for Ms. Ruble, her husband told her that she'd hurt his feelings, and she asked herself why she often tunes him out. She thought it was partly because he typically talks about software and work—subjects she says she considers “dry”—and he doesn't often share his emotions.

She also realized she found it hard to give him her full attention, because then she would have to recognize how much he needed her, and that thought scared her, says Ms. Ruble, who is 43 and lives in Half Moon Bay, Calif. She and her husband have been married 11 years.

Ms. Ruble decided to put some of her professional listening skills to work at home. First, she acknowledged her problem. “I stink at listening to you,” she told her husband. Then she worked out steps to practicing what she calls “good listening hygiene.”

When her husband wants to talk, Ms. Ruble now asks herself: “Do I want to listen right now?” If the answer is no, she postpones. “Sometimes I am just a bad listener because I am in a state of deep thinking and it takes me a bit to settle in for a listen,” she says.

When she is ready, she begins by calming down, taking slow, deep breaths. “I need to prioritize being slow and present,” she says.

Then she removes distractions, turning off the computer or the TV and giving her husband her undivided attention. If they are at a restaurant, she takes the seat facing the wall.

She makes sure to look her husband in the eye. And she let's go of her need to talk. “When I am too focused on efficient communication, then I come across as a jerk and my husband feels dismissed,” she says. “When I let the

conversation meander, it is usually fun.”

In the new year, Ms. Ruble has resolved to set aside time to talk more often. At night, after the children are in bed, she turns off all the technology, lights some candles and puts on some music. Then she and her husband sit down to read and talk together.

“I am trying to just stop and hear him out,” she says. “This is the guy I love. I want him to feel cared about.”

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