

Active Listening

Treating listening as an active process, rather than a passive one. This means participating in conversation, rather than acting as an audience. Active listeners show they are listening, encourage sharing, and strive to understand the speaker.

Show You're Listening

Put away distractions.

Watching TV, using your phone, or doing other things while listening sends the message that the speaker's words are not important. Putting away distractions allows you to focus on the conversation and help the speaker feel heard. Use verbal and nonverbal communication.

Body language and short verbal cues that match the speaker's affect (e.g. responding excitedly if the speaker is excited) show interest and empathy.

Verbal: "mm-hmm" / "uh-huh" "that's interesting" "that makes sense" "I understand"

Nonverbal: nodding in agreement reacting to emotional content (e.g. smiling) eye contact

Encourage Sharing

Ask open-ended questions. These are questions that encourage elaboration, rather than "yes" or "no" responses. Open-ended questions tell the speaker you are listening, and you want to learn more.

"What is it like to ___?"

"How do you ___?"

"How did you feel when ___?"

"What do you like about ___?"

"Can you tell me more about ___?"

"What are your thoughts about ___?"

Use reflections. In your own words, summarize the speaker's most important points. Be sure to include emotional content, even if it was only communicated through tone or body language.

Speaker: I've been having a hard time at work. There's way too much to do and I can't keep up. My boss is frustrated that everything isn't done, but I can't help it.

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Listener: It sounds like you're doing your best to keep up, but there's too much work. That sounds stressful!

Strive to Understand

Be present. Listening means paying attention to body language, tone, and verbal content. Focus your attention on listening, instead of other mental distractions, such as what you want to say next. When possible, save sensitive conversations for a quiet time with few distractions. Listen with an open mind.

Your job is to understand the speaker's point of view, even if you don't agree. Avoid forming opinions and making judgments until you fully understand their perspective.