

10 Steps to Better Active Listening Skills

Below you will find 10 different skills that help people be better active listeners. You don't have to become adept at each of these skills to be a good active listener, but the more you do, the better you'll be. If you even just use 3 or 4 of these skills, you will find yourself listening and hearing more of what another person is saying to you.

1. Restating

To show you are listening, repeat every so often what you think the person said — not by parroting, but by paraphrasing what you heard in your own words. For example, "Let's see if I'm clear about this. . ."

2. Summarizing

Bring together the facts and pieces of the problem to check understanding — for example, "So it sounds to me as if . . ." Or, "Is that it?"

3. Minimal encouragers

Use brief, positive prompts to keep the conversation going and show you are listening — for example, "umm-hmmm," "Oh?" "I understand," "Then?" "And?"

4. Reflecting

Instead of just repeating, reflect the speaker's words in terms of feelings — for example, "This seems really important to you. . ."

5. Giving feedback

Let the person know what your initial thoughts are on the situation. Share pertinent information, observations, insights, and experiences. Then listen carefully to confirm.

6. Emotion labeling

Putting feelings into words will often help a person to see things more objectively. To help the person begin, use "door openers" — for example, "I'm sensing that you're feeling frustrated. . . worried. . . anxious. . ."

7. Probing

Ask open ended questions to draw the person out and get deeper and more meaningful information — for example, "What do you think would happen if you. . .?"

8. Validation

Acknowledge the individual's problems, issues, and feelings. Listen openly and with empathy, and respond in an interested way — for example, "I appreciate your willingness to talk about such a difficult issue. . ."

9. Effective pause

Deliberately pause at key points for emphasis. This will tell the person you are saying something that is very important to them.

10. Silence

Allow for comfortable silences to slow down the exchange. Give a person time to think as well as talk. Silence can also be very helpful in diffusing an unproductive interaction.

Also....be aware of these roadblocks to communication, which can stop it dead in its tracks:

1. "Why" questions - They tend to make people defensive.
2. Quick reassurance - saying things like, "Don't worry about that."
3. Advising - "I think the best thing for you is to move to assisted living."
4. Digging for information and forcing someone to talk about something they would rather not talk about.
5. Patronizing - "You poor thing, I know just how you feel."
6. Preaching - "You should. . ." Or, "You shouldn't. . ."
7. Interrupting - Shows you aren't interested in what someone is saying.