

The Art of Listening

No wonder listening is an undervalued art. Research shows that we speak at a rate of about 125 words per minute, yet we have the capacity to listen to approximately 400 words per minute. So what are we doing with that extra space in our minds when someone else is talking? Are we really listening?

I have a friend who used to multi-task when we spoke on the phone. He would respond appropriately to what I was saying, but I could hear him shuffling papers or trying to quietly order food at the deli (yes, this actually happened). Even though he was following the conversation, I felt somewhat rejected as I was sharing my innermost thoughts and feelings. Fortunately, our friendship was more important than his to-do list, and now I happily get his full attention.

Listening is essential to fulfilling relationships. If you are experiencing challenging interactions or you want your connections to deepen, reflect on how you can improve your listening skills. There are so many wonderful benefits to being a good listener.

Consider the following:

- People will feel be more drawn to you; they will like you more.
- You will learn something new.
- You will solve problems more effectively.
- You will experience less loneliness and frustration.
- You will feel happier and more relaxed.

Learn to listen well and watch all your relationships thrive. Here's how:

Pay attention

Since our brains have the capacity to process 275 more words per minute than are actually spoken, we tend to fill up the void with extraneous thoughts. Notice how when someone is speaking, you are partially listening, while simultaneously planning the rest of your day, replaying a meeting that just occurred, or deciding what you will say next. Paying attention is the cardinal rule for good listening. Hear the words, and let their meaning in. If your mind wanders, simply re-focus your attention on the conversation.

Be receptive

If you show up with an agenda, you are not going to be available to fully hear what the other person is saying. There is no problem with having goals for an interaction, but let them go while the other person is speaking so you can hear what is being expressed. Balance your need for a given outcome with your desire to sustain a harmonious relationship.

Check your understanding

Make sure you can repeat what you just heard, and if you can't, ask for clarification. You might be surprised at how much you are missing. Most people are. When you think you've gotten it, you might say, "So what you are saying is...." to verify your understanding.

Be an explorer

Explorers are open and curious. They are inquisitive, without knowing what they will find. So what to do with all of that excess brain power? Focus on the speaker. Notice body language, tone of voice, and rate of speaking. Then look beneath the words to see what feelings and needs are being communicated. You never know what you might find.

Show interest

If you find yourself bored and distracted, reconnect with the interaction. Maintain eye contact, uncross your arms, and ask questions that take the conversation deeper. Find out what really matters to the person you are speaking with.

Be patient

As much as you may be tempted, don't speak over someone who is talking. When you feel the urge to step in, take a breath, let your agenda go, and continue to listen. If you need to move the conversation along, do so politely, as in, "Excuse me, I'm so sorry for interrupting, but" Likewise, be careful not to jump to conclusions or assume you know what hasn't yet been said. These are all signs that your inner explorer has fallen asleep. Revitalize your experience by paying attention to what is happening in the moment.

Get out of a rut

Have you ever had the same problematic conversation with someone over and over? Bring a fresh perspective to the relationship by redoubling your efforts to listen. Let go of your need to be right or your ideas about what the other person should be saying or doing, and hear them as if for the first time. This moves you from contraction and limit to possibility and potential simply by listening.

Effective listening develops empathy, which is the capacity for a deep understanding of another's experience. And isn't that what it takes for a relationship to thrive? It's as simple as paying attention.

How has better listening affected your relationships?

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