

Active Listening

See also: [Types of Listening](#)

Active listening is a skill that can be acquired and developed with practice. However, active listening can be difficult to master and will, therefore, take time and [patience](#) to develop.

'*Active listening*' means, as its name suggests, actively listening. That is fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively 'hearing' the message of the speaker.

Active listening involves listening with all senses. As well as giving full attention to the speaker, it is important that the 'active listener' is also 'seen' to be listening - otherwise the speaker may conclude that what they are talking about is uninteresting to the listener.

Interest can be conveyed to the speaker by using both verbal and non-verbal messages such as maintaining eye contact, nodding your head and smiling, agreeing by saying 'Yes' or simply 'Mmm hmm' to encourage them to continue. By providing this 'feedback' the person speaking will usually feel more at ease and therefore communicate more easily, openly and honestly.

Listening is the most fundamental component of interpersonal communication skills.

Listening is not something that just happens (that is hearing), listening is an active process in which a conscious decision is made to listen to and understand the messages of the speaker.

Listeners should remain neutral and non-judgmental, this means trying not to take sides or form opinions, especially early in the conversation. Active listening is also about patience - pauses and short periods of silence should be accepted.

Listeners should not be tempted to jump in with questions or comments every time there are a few seconds of silence. Active listening involves giving the other person time to explore their thoughts and feelings, they should, therefore, be given adequate time for that.

Active listening not only means focusing fully on the speaker but also actively showing verbal and non-verbal signs of listening.

Generally speakers want listeners to demonstrate '*active listening*' by responding appropriately to what they are saying. Appropriate responses to listening can be both verbal and non-verbal, examples of which are listed below:

Signs of Active Listening

Non-Verbal Signs of Attentive or Active Listening

This is a generic list of non-verbal signs of listening, in other words people who are listening are more likely to display at least some of these signs. However these signs may not be appropriate in all situations and across all cultures.

Smile



Small smiles can be used to show that the listener is paying attention to what is being said or as a way of agreeing or being happy about the messages being received. Combined with nods of the head, smiles can be powerful in affirming that messages are being listened to and understood.

Eye Contact

It is normal and usually encouraging for the listener to look at the speaker. Eye contact can however be intimidating, especially for more shy speakers – gauge how much eye contact is appropriate for any given situation. Combine eye contact with smiles and other non-verbal messages to encourage the speaker.

Posture

Posture can tell a lot about the sender and receiver in interpersonal interactions. The attentive listener tends to lean slightly forward or sideways whilst sitting. Other signs of active listening may include a slight slant of the head or resting the head on one hand.

Mirroring

Automatic reflection/mirroring of any facial expressions used by the speaker can be a sign of attentive listening. These reflective expressions can help to show sympathy and empathy in more emotional situations. Attempting to consciously mimic facial expressions (i.e. not automatic reflection of expressions) can be a sign of inattention.

Distraction

The active listener will not be distracted and therefore will refrain from fidgeting, looking at a clock or watch, doodling, playing with their hair or picking their fingernails.

See our pages: [Non-Verbal Communication](#), [Body Language](#) and [Personal Appearance](#) for more information.

Be Aware That:

It is perfectly possible to learn and mimic non-verbal signs of active listening and not actually be listening at all.

It is more difficult to mimic verbal signs of listening and comprehension.

Verbal Signs of Attentive or Active Listening

Positive Reinforcement

Although a strong signal of attentiveness, caution should be used when using positive verbal reinforcement.

Although some positive words of encouragement may be beneficial to the speaker the listener should use them sparingly so as not to distract from what is being said or place unnecessary emphasis on parts of the message.

Casual and frequent use of words and phrases, such as: '*very good*', '*yes*' or '*indeed*' can become irritating to the speaker. It is usually better to elaborate and explain why you are agreeing with a certain point.

Remembering

The human mind is notoriously bad at remembering details, especially for any length of time.

However, remembering a few key points, or even the name of the speaker, can help to reinforce that the messages sent have been received and understood – i.e. listening has been successful. Remembering details, ideas and concepts from previous conversations proves that attention was kept and is likely to encourage the speaker to continue. During longer exchanges it may be appropriate to make very brief notes to act as a memory jog when questioning or clarifying later.

See our page: [Note-Taking](#).

Questioning

The listener can demonstrate that they have been paying attention by asking relevant questions and/or making statements that build or help to clarify what the speaker has said. By asking relevant questions the listener also helps to reinforce that they have an interest in what the speaker has been saying.

See our pages: [Questioning](#) and [Types of Question](#) for more information.

Reflection

Reflecting is closely repeating or paraphrasing what the speaker has said in order to show comprehension. Reflection is a powerful skill that can reinforce the message of the speaker and demonstrate understanding.

See our page: [Reflection](#).

Clarification

Clarifying involves asking questions of the speaker to ensure that the correct message has been received. Clarification usually involves the use of open questions which enables the speaker to expand on certain points as necessary.

See our page on [Clarification](#).

Summarisation

Repeating a summary of what has been said back to the speaker is a technique used by the listener to repeat what has been said in their own words. Summarising involves taking the main points of the received message and reiterating them in a logical and clear way, giving the speaker chance to correct if necessary.

Further Reading from Skills You Need

[Our Communication Skills eBooks](#)

Learn more about the key communication skills you need to be a more effective communicator.

Our eBooks are ideal for anyone who wants to learn about or develop their interpersonal skills and are full of easy-to-follow, practical information.

