



Improve your listening skills

Good listening skills are vital to all our interpersonal relationships - with colleagues, parents, even our own family. To communicate with anyone, you first need to understand where the other person is "coming from."

At work, lack of communication is often the cause of difficult and stressful situations, all of which can have an impact on staff health and well-being. In these situations, we tend to assume that the person giving the message is the one to blame - but what about the person who is doing the listening?

People can feel frustrated if they feel that they are not being listened to, causing them to bottle up their feelings and anxieties. Just talking things through can be a real help.

Good listeners can:

- Better understand what is expected of them
- Build solid relationships with others
- Work well in a team
- Resolve problems and conflict more easily

How well do you listen?

How often do you find your mind wandering when others are talking? Or have difficulty remembering the details of an important conversation? What we often fail to realize is that there is more to listening than merely hearing what is said!

There are three stages to the listening process:

- Hearing - if you can repeat what was said
- Understanding - you take what you heard and understand it in your own way
- Judging - you process what you heard and make judgments about what was said

Most of us are worse at listening than we think, but listening is a skill that is rarely taught. Fortunately, you can improve your listening skills through practice.

Barriers to listening

Good listening involves an ability to focus and block out irrelevant thoughts. Counselors frequently report that personal and professional commitments are distracting teachers. This results in little time for proper listening.

For teachers or tutors, noise is a substantial barrier to listening. Trying to give your full attention to each specific student when there are 30 others demanding your help is difficult to say the least. For all its benefits, technology has also made it more difficult for us to listen effectively, with face to face meetings and telephone calls being increasingly replaced by email.

Beware of these other things that may get in the way of listening:

- emotion such as worry or anger
- bias or prejudice
- language barriers or different accents
- short attention span

Ten steps to effective listening

These tips apply when communicating with anyone - colleagues, students, friends and family:

- Focus on the speaker, maintaining eye contact - this shows you are interested.
- Don't interrupt or finish the other person's sentences - this will break their flow and can be very annoying!
- Be attentive, yet relaxed - concentrate on what is being said.
- Keep an open mind - don't be judgmental or be distracted by your own feelings and biases.
- Think before answering - but avoid rehearsing your answer while the other person is talking, you could miss important points.
- Don't impose your solutions - being too opinionated can make people less likely to open up. And don't insist on having the last word!
- Develop an active listening style - reflect back what you have heard and ask clarifying questions.
- Give the speaker regular feedback - nodding, smiling, saying 'yes'.
- Pay attention to what isn't said - body language.
- When dealing with difficult people, spend more time listening than talking.

Where can I go for further support or information?

If you are an educator from one of the districts that have signed up to this service and you wish to speak to a qualified counselor, you can call the toll free Educator Support Line on 1-877-876-4327.