

Zip It and Listen

Have you ever tried to bare your soul and create a bond with your partner only to hear ‘uhuh, uhuh’ accompanied by the glazed eyes of someone who is falling asleep? Or the bright eyes and red face of a child ready to pop with a deluge of *I*'s? Or maybe your elderly mother with Alzheimer's keeps correcting you and shaking her head?

What is one of the most important factors of having a meaningful and understanding conversation that connects with and values your loved ones' views or opinions?—Listening! There may be instances when it seems difficult to stay focused on what your spouse is saying. Distractions or boredom are a couple of reasons that could be to blame. The person you are caring for may be distracted by pain, current events they're experiencing in their life, or only half listening to the conversation because they're more focused on what *they* want to say next.

Feeling bored or uninterested can also be caused because you're just not understanding their point of view. When it comes to constantly living in each other's pockets because you work from home, take care of your loved one, or homeschool your kids, it is easy to think you know everything and stop listening so intently. Ultimately, not being able to focus during a conversation is a sign that you're being a poor listener. Unfortunately, according to Manusov et al. (2020), “Being in a relationship with another requires effort.”



So, how do we become better listeners? The initial step in developing a trusting and collaborative relationship through communication is understanding *how* to listen (Thistle & McNaughton, 2015). Actively listening during a conversation enables us to not only be better listeners, it also encourages involvement, interest, and connectivity with those in your home.

As we actively listen during a conversation, we are gathering information. This is where our nonverbal communication skills we learned about last week become useful to us. Not only are we listening to what they are saying, we're processing their body language at the same time (Cheon & Grant, 2009). Is your spouse's body language in harmony with what they are saying, or is it conflicting? In order to gather information, we need to give our unconditional attention, communicate that we are comprehending, and ask questions for additional information when necessary (Thistle & McNaughton, 2015). It is important to consider the needs, values, and background of the person you are caring for, your spouse, or roommate, in order to be respectful in your responses and to show empathy to them (Thistle & McNaughton, 2015). This also helps you to be more mindful during conversations. This means you need to stay open, don't jump to

conclusions or form attributions (accusations or blame), and remember what was said. Mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Manusov et al., 2020).

Enhanced Interest

By Crystal Smith

For the most part, I can have very meaningful conversations with my husband. We can connect on many levels and convey interest and enthusiasm during our discussions. However, I notice a difference in my attention or awareness when my husband talks about things I don't understand, such as his hobby of working on computers. At times, I find my thoughts wondering, only half listening, because I'm not really understanding what he is talking about. In contrast, when I'm talking to him about my hobby, crocheting, which is completely uninteresting to him, I still feel his love and enthusiasm as I talk. I know that even though he doesn't personally enjoy my hobby; he does enjoy the joy it gives me. Therefore, he will ask questions to better understand and show his encouragement on projects I'm working on. When I realized this difference in conversation, I mimicked his style of being more involved in my otherwise boring subject to him. I asked questions to understand the components of computer repair, and I noticed my interest in what he was saying was enhanced as I learned something new. Now, although I may not have an interest in repairing a computer, I find my husband's hobby interesting, and I have gained a much more respectful perspective for his interests.

Active-empathic listening (AEL)—When you add empathy to active listening, the listening process is enhanced. When applying AEL, you are cognitively attentive to, understanding of, receiving, and interpreting messages. Sensing, processing, and responding is a three-stage listening activity used to enable individuals to “be more or less active and empathic” (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011). This is where the speaker-listener technique can be used. We will discuss what the speaker does in lesson 4. For this lesson, we will focus on the rules for the listener.

Since work from home parents, couples, or caregivers spend a large amount of time together, it can sometimes be difficult to prevent our emotions from being expressed negatively. As you practice healthy communication—learning how to express emotions and feelings in healthy ways—you will fortify your relationships against stressful situations. Actively listening to our loved ones will enhance our ability to not only empathize but also to show our respect and patience for them. We all need to be heard and understood, so let's start with listening.

*This week, please practice your listening skills by choosing a partner, and having them explain something to you. Zip it and follow the steps of active listening. Improve and build your relationship one skill at a time.

Step one—Attend to the Speaker:

- As the listener, you must pay attention to the speaker.
- Start by sensing their nonverbal and verbal cues.

- Process them to see if you understand.
- Then respond with either questions for further clarification or use encouraging behaviors for them to continue.
- Being mindful of what they are saying means not only being present mentally but also empathic and curious (Manusov et al., 2020).

Step two—Focus on the Speaker's Message:

- Make sure you understand what the other person is saying.
- Paraphrase or ask questions for clarification. “I understand how others feel and I ask questions that show my understanding of others’ positions” (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011).
- Stay open, don’t jump to conclusions, don’t find blame (Manusov et al., 2020).
- Do not think about your responses or distractions, e.g., do not think about what you are going to have for dinner.
- Keep your focus and respect on the speaker.

Step three—Respectfully Respond

- Purposely give active listening responses (Simon, 2018). Active listening responses, or continuers, include eye contact, nods, smiles, and verbal cues (‘yes,’ ‘uhuh,’ ‘right’).
- These verbal and nonverbal cues show the speaker that you are listening and interested in hearing more, without interrupting them (Simon, 2018).

Step four—Observe the Interaction

- Note the changes in your communication patterns after trying this exercise.
- Are they positive or negative?
- Note how you and the speaker feel after this interaction.

Step five—Feedback

- Write down your thoughts in our feedback form at the bottom of the [lesson page](#)

[Printable copy of the speaker-listener technique](#)

*Disclaimer: The authors of this online curriculum are not therapists, and are not authorized to give personalized advice to any of the readers. The content of this lesson plan is the creation of the authors alone and does not represent any other entity or organization.

References

- Cheon, J., & Grant, M. (2009). Active listening: Web-based assessment tool for communication and active listening skill development. *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning*, 53(6), 24–34.
<https://doi-org.byui.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s11528-009-0340-4>
- Cutillo, C. (2022, February 23). *How to have better relationship communication: The speaker listener technique*. Jamron Counseling.
<https://www.jamroncounseling.com/post/how-to-have-better-relationship-communication-the-speaker-listener-technique>
- Gearhart, C. C., & Bodie, G. D. (2011). Active-empathic listening as a general social skill: Evidence from bivariate and canonical correlations. *Communication Reports*, 24(2), 86–98. <https://doi-org.byui.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/08934215.2011.610731>
- Manusov, V., Crowley, J. P., Stofleth, D., & Harvey, J. A. (2020). Conditions and consequences of listening well for interpersonal relationships: Modeling active-empathic listening, social-emotional skills, trait mindfulness, and relational quality. *International Journal of Listening*, 34(2), 110–126.
<https://doi-org.byui.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/10904018.2018.1507745>
- Simon, C. (2018). The functions of active listening responses. *Behavioural Processes*, 157, 47–53. <https://doi-org.byui.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.beproc.2018.08.013>
- Thistle, J. J., & McNaughton, D. (2015). Teaching active listening skills to pre-service speech-language pathologists: A first step in supporting collaboration with parents of

young children who require AAC. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*,
46(1), 44–55. https://doi-org.byui.idm.oclc.org/10.1044/2014_LSHSS-14-0001