

ACTIVE LISTENING

Difficulty: **INTENSIVE** | Frequency: **1X/WEEK** | Duration: **10 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Often we'll listen to a conversation partner without really hearing them. In the process, we miss opportunities to connect with that person--and even risk making them feel neglected, disrespected, and resentful.

This exercise helps you express active interest in what the other person has to say and make them feel heard—a way to foster empathy and connection. This technique is especially well-suited for difficult conversations (such as arguments with a romantic partner) and for expressing support. It may also help facilitate constructive conversations across political, cultural, or other differences; however, studies have found that, when there's a power imbalance between people of different groups, it's more important for the person with less social power to *give* their perspective while the person with more social power listens and tries to take their perspective. Research suggests that using this technique can help others feel more understood and improve relationship satisfaction.

TIME REQUIRED

At least 10 minutes. Try to make time for this practice at least once per week.

HOW TO DO IT

Find a quiet place where you can talk with a conversation partner without interruption or distraction. Invite this person to share what's on their mind. As they do so, try to follow the steps below. You don't need to cover every step, but the more steps you follow, the more effective this practice is likely to be.

1. **Paraphrase.** Once the other person has finished expressing a thought, try to summarize what they said to make sure you understand and to show that you are paying attention. Helpful ways to paraphrase include “What I hear you saying is...,” “It sounds like...,” and “If I understand you right...”
2. **Ask questions.** When appropriate, ask questions to encourage the other person to tell you more about their thoughts and feelings. Try to avoid jumping to conclusions about what the other person means. Instead, ask questions to clarify their meaning, such as, “When you say ____, do you mean ____?”
3. **Express empathy.** If the other person voices negative feelings, try to validate these feelings rather than questioning or defending against them. For example, if the speaker expresses frustration, try to consider why they feel that way. Respond with support and understanding, regardless of whether you think that feeling is justified or whether you would feel that way yourself if you were in their position. You might respond, “I can sense that you're feeling frustrated,” or even “I can understand how that situation could cause frustration.”
4. **Use engaged body language.** You can show that you are engaged and interested by making eye contact, nodding, facing the other person, and maintaining an open and relaxed body posture. Try to avoid giving into distractions in your environment or checking your phone. Be mindful of your facial expressions: Avoid expressions that might seem disapproving or disgusted.
5. **Avoid judgment.** Your goal is to understand the other person's perspective and accept it for what it is,

even if you disagree with it. Try not to interrupt with counterarguments or mentally prepare a rebuttal while the other person is speaking.

6. **Avoid giving advice.** Problem solving is likely to be more effective after both partners understand each another's perspective and feel heard. Moving too quickly into advice-giving may not be helpful.
7. **Take turns.** After the other person has had a chance to speak and you have engaged in the active listening steps above, ask if it's OK for you to share your thoughts and feelings. When sharing your perspective, express yourself as clearly as possible using "I" statements (e.g., "I feel overwhelmed when you don't help out around the house."). It may also be helpful, when relevant, to express empathy for the other person's perspective (e.g., "I know you've been very busy lately and don't mean to leave me hanging.").

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Weger, H., Castle Bell, G., Minei, E. M., & Robinson, M. C. (2014). [The relative effectiveness of active listening in initial interactions](#). *International Journal of Listening*, 28(1), 13-31.

A group of mostly young, white, female college students had brief conversations (about their biggest disappointment with their university) with someone trained to engage in Active Listening, someone who gave them advice, or someone who gave simple acknowledgments of their point of view. People who received Active Listening reported feeling more understood at the end of the conversation.

Bruneau, E. G., & Saxe, R. (2012). [The power of being heard: The benefits of 'perspective-giving' in the context of intergroup conflict](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(4), 855-866.

One study paired Mexican immigrants with white Americans, while another paired Israelis with Palestinians. In both studies, each member of the pair was asked to share their perspectives on the difficulties of life in their society, and to take the perspective of the other person when they were sharing their views. This dialogue significantly improved participants' attitudes toward the other group—for instance, they felt greater empathy for their suffering, trusted their intentions more, and felt more warmly toward the group as a whole. However, for members of the pair with less social power (Mexican immigrants and Palestinians), attitudes toward the other group improved more after they gave their perspective than after they took the other person's perspective.

Who Has Tried The Practice?

Additional research has engaged members of other groups:

- [Straight couples in Switzerland](#) who practiced Active Listening for 16 minutes felt more satisfied with their relationships and used healthier coping behaviors during their conversations.
- [Japanese office workers](#) with supervisors who used Active Listening felt less stressed, more supported, and more in control at work than workers with supervisors who did not use the practice as often. However, Active Listening benefitted younger males more than their older or female coworkers.
- [Incarcerated adolescents in San Francisco](#) who practiced Active Listening as part of a 10-week mindfulness program felt less stressed and improved in self-regulating their emotions.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Active listening helps listeners better understand others' perspectives and helps speakers feel more understood and less threatened. This technique can prevent miscommunication and spare hurt feelings on both sides. By improving communication and preventing arguments from escalating, active listening can make relationships more enduring and satisfying. Practicing active listening with someone close to you can also help you listen better when interacting with other people in your life, such as friends or co-workers.

SOURCES

Instructions adapted from: Markman, H., Stanley, S., & Blumberg, S.L. (1994). *Fighting for your marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

