

Foundations of successful communication

Being present

Good communication is more than just talking – it is a blend of actively listening to your conversation partner and clearly stating your response in language that can be understood. Additionally, non-verbal cues are utilized to facilitate understanding. Active listening involves being present—in the moment—NOT thinking about what you plan to say when the other person stops talking! It is paying attention to what is said and the way in which it is said. Many of us rarely experience being truly listened to in our daily lives. We are typically heard with "half an ear" while the listener thinks of other things and/or multitasks. By giving someone your full attention they will not only feel heard, but you will be more aware of what is actually being communicated. When fully listening, you are less likely to filter out the information that does not fit your view of the situation.

Reflective listening

Communicating clearly involves not only speaking with care, but also includes utilizing active listening and reflecting back what is said. This ensures you are addressing the points and ideas your conversation partner just conveyed. We often listen with a "filter" on our ears. We tend to hear that which agrees with us or fits our notion of what the speaker should be saying, and then ignore the rest. For example: If we have the expectation that the other person will be negative about an idea, we may filter out any positive comments and only focus on the negative ones. We do not truly hear the other. Our filters depend on our needs, our self-esteem and the communication patterns that we learned from our families. Make sure you are responding to the same conversation as your

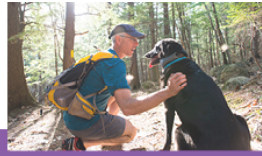
partner when you speak in order to be heard. Practice paraphrasing back with each other to ensure both are fully heard and completely understood. Simply take the time to say, for example, "What I heard you saying is..." and summarize the points just made. Then ask if that is accurate or if anything was missed.

Non-verbal cues

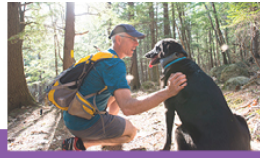
Research indicates that 95% of all communication is non-verbal. Factors such as tone of voice, the pace of speaking, how we hold our bodies, the physical space between the conversant, amount of eye contact and loudness/softness of voice often convey more about what is being said than actual words. When we agree on a subject with another person in a conversation, our non-verbal cues will match. A simple way to convey empathy and understanding, even if you disagree with what is being said, is to match your tone of voice, speed of speaking and body language to the other speaker.

Complicating factors

Another factor that may affect the ability to communicate effectively is the different style in which people communicate, particularly different tendencies between men and women. For example, a common pattern in males is to use communication to transfer information, whereas females often communicate to process emotions or a decision. If these communication patterns are not understood, it can lead to confusion, frustration, and faulty communication. The male does not understand why the female keeps talking about the subject when he has given her the information she needs to make a decision, the female does not understand why the



male is giving her advice when she wants to talk about the issue in more detail so she can process what needs to be accomplished. Be aware of different communication styles and utilize this type of information to enable you to structure your communication and responses accordingly. This will make you a much stronger communicator!



Five steps to effective listening

The most effective communication happens when both parties listen well. Here are some ideas that can help improve your ability to communicate through active listening.

1. Make eye contact

- Eye contact sends a nonverbal message that you're ready to hear what the other person has to say.
- It helps keep other things from distracting you.
- It also conveys to the other person that he or she is important to you.

2. Give encouragement

- Nonverbal cues such as nodding, leaning forward and keeping an open posture all communicate to the speaker that you're paying attention.
- Verbal encouragers such as, "I see" or "mmhmm" also let the speaker know you're interested.

3. Empathize

- Nonverbal cues such as tone of voice can give you a sense of the emotions behind the words.
- Use feeling words to deepen the conversation.— For example: "It sounds like you felt ___"

4. Reflect

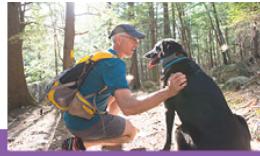
- Reflecting back to the speaker communicates that you're keeping up with what's being said.— For example: "So what I heard you say is ___."
- This also can open the door to new ways of thinking about the situation or things the other person hadn't planned on talking about.— For example, "It sounds like you're finding a lot of great new ways to keep your kids busy for the summer."

5. Engage

- Don't be afraid to ask questions or prompt the speaker to keep talking. This enables deeper exploration and again communicates that you're interested.— For example: "How did that make you feel?" or "Tell me more about that."
- You can also use questions to clarify what you heard.

These steps can help you show others you're fully present with them. They can help you listen well which can improve the quality of your interactions.

Best of all, they can help with all of your relationships. At work, at home and everywhere else, being a good listener can help you understand what others need and want. And that can contribute to getting along with others better and resolving any conflicts easier.



Developing good listening skills

Have you ever thought about what you'll eat for dinner or what's next on your to-do list while you were in the middle of a chat with someone? Do you find yourself watching people's mouths move but not truly hearing what's being said? Listening involves more than hearing another person's voice. Tone of voice, body language and context all play a role in active listening. Here are a few tips to hone your listening skills.

Tune out distracting thoughts

Give your full attention to the speaker. This is much easier to do when you're not thinking about other things. You might take care of daily tasks beforehand or postpone the chat until the tasks are complete.

Tune in on the speaker

Show you're paying attention. Giving good feedback assures others that you're listening. Try to practice appropriate:

- Eye contact
- Open posture (arms at side, facing person squarely, relaxed)
- Head nodding and verbal encouragers such as "mmhmm"

Reflect the speaker's message. Before moving the conversation forward, share your thoughts on the other person's experience and what it means. For instance, "It sounds like you were pretty scared when..."

Give thoughtful feedback

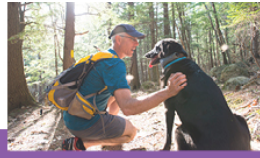
Take your time to respond. Don't try to think up your response before the other person's finished talking. If you feel you need to give constructive feedback, focus on actions. For instance, "When you _____,

it_____."

Ask questions. Open-ended questions such as "what" and "how" questions can make the speaker feel valued. And they can open the speaker up to deeper levels of sharing. Closed questions such as "yes" or "no" often lead to short and controlled responses.

A final note

The best way to improve your active listening skills is to practice with someone you trust. You might find that you and someone you know have similar goals or areas of weakness. Any time we try something new, it might feel awkward, but the more you practice active listening, the more natural it will feel.



Communication – FAQ

How will I know if I have problems with communication?

Signs that your communication skills are not working are:

- If you find that other's think you have an opinion you do not hold.
- If you cannot remember what the other person said in the conversation.
- If you walk away feeling like you were not heard or that you did not have a chance to say what you felt.
- If you find yourself re-playing the conversation and wishing you had responded differently.
- If co-workers, friends or family members avoid telling you bad news.

Why do I have problems talking to my boss but I can easily talk to my buddies?

You might notice that you communicate very well in certain areas (such as at work), when talking about certain subjects (such as sports or children) or with certain people (such as those of your own sex) but your communication skills are not effective outside of those comfort areas. Improving your communication outside of your comfort zones may take education to learn new skills and practice to increase your comfort in using the skills.

What are some of the barriers to good communication?

- Poor listening skills – You have to know what the conversation is about before you can participate.
- Gender differences – Males and females may have different patterns of communication which interfere

with their ability to understand the dynamic of the conversation.

- Personal filters that result from our needs, our self-esteem and the communication patterns that we learned from our families may affect what we hear in the conversation.
- Personal expectations may affect what we think is being said instead of what the other person is saying.
- Not telling the truth or making a statement particularly if others hold a different opinion due to lack of confidence or self-esteem
- A response of anger or aggression when challenged by conflicting ideas or personalities

How can I overcome these barriers?

Education on gender differences and listening skills may help you improve your communication skills and broaden your comfort zones. Personal filters, personal expectations, and lack of confidence or anger/aggression issues may respond to either individual or group counseling. Counseling may help you identify the factors that skew the information you receive and change the way in which you respond. Groups counseling has an added benefit of providing a safe place to practice new skills.