



Personal Tool

Active listening skills

Listening – why do we do it? We do it to understand the people and the world around us. Listening is just as important as speech or sight, but when we listen, we start to understand. The Dalai Lama says that when you talk you are repeating what you already know but if you listen then you will probably learn something new.

Communication has been a major theme over the past year, and our wellbeing calendar dedicates a month and often a quarter to listening each year. It is a very big deal. Yet many people really struggle to maintain a high level of listening. Clinicians spend their lives listening and focusing on clients' stories only to come home and miss a crucial part of the sentence from their family about plans on the weekend. The good news is like any skill; we can get better at it with practice.

Face the person you are talking to.

Whether you are on Zoom or masked up. Face them or look into the camera so that they can feel your attention. If you are on a video platform, this also stops you from scanning your hair and face for flaws! It also means that you are less likely to get distracted and think about emails and other work while talking to someone (face to face or on a screen).

Be attentive, but relaxed.

Maintain a level of eye contact that is comfortable for both of you, making sure that it is clear they have your attention. This is where Mindfulness practice can help you to stop being distracted from other thoughts which may come into your mind. Label these thoughts, slot them away and keep focused. A great rule of thumb is don't ask two questions in a row. Wait and pause and see where the conversation goes. Similarly, focus on hearing the answer rather than think of what you will say next.

Keep an open mind.

Listen without applying judgment or trying to connect the dots before you know what the other person is telling you. This type of thinking compromises your effectiveness as a listener and may prevent you from hearing what is actually being said.

Conversations are rarely completely devoid of emotion and emotion can affect the way people communicate – it may take time for them to get out what they want to say.

Remember, it's not a quiz.

There is no need to finish the other person's sentence just because you are pretty sure you know what it will be! If you do, it will appear that you don't have time or you already think you know what they will say. Either way, it could shut down the chance for a real conversation.



Try not to interrupt; this may require practice!

Quite often, when we get excited or passionate, we tend to want to jump in and share our thoughts and excitement. Take a moment next time you are in a social situation and reflect if you interrupt others when they are talking. Interrupting sends a variety of messages. It says:

- "I'm more important than you are."
- "What I have to say is more interesting, accurate or relevant."
- "I don't really care what you think."
- "I don't have time for your opinion."

If you are a quick thinker, you may need to relax your pace for the slower, more thoughtful communicator—or for the person for whom English is not their first language.

Try not to problem solve. Helping someone to figure out their own solutions will always be better than telling someone what they should do. Remember you are there to listen unless or until you are asked for your advice.

Ask questions but be aware that your questions should be to aid your understanding of what you are being told and not to move the conversation in another direction.

Pay attention to what isn't said. The tone of our voices and body language can be used to display that we are "leaning in" and really listening to what is being said. We also need to take in what the other person is telling us through non-verbal cues.

Are we on the same page? Here is something to try; for at least one week, at the end of every conversation in which information is exchanged, conclude with a summary statement or follow up with an email that captures the most important points or actions.

There may be times when you are asked to listen to someone who is in trouble. Processing difficult or distressing information and knowing how to react or how to help can require support. To help, talk to AccessEAP and our friendly team of counsellors who can assist. For a confidential conversation with one of our experienced clinical professionals, please contact **AccessEAP** on **1800 818 728**.

