

Together Notes: poor listening / good listening

We learn to communicate from the cradle and continue to learn from our families, peers at school, work colleagues and so on. There are some ways that we can show we don't really want to listen at all: avoiding and withdrawing are a kind of running away, pseudo-listening fakes interest and selective listening tunes in and out of conversations only for points of interest.

When we **do** listen we can say and do things, which deflect attention away from the main point and the speaker. The table below sets out some bad habits. We will relate to some and not to others but it can be useful as a basis for discussion. It is worth trying to develop new habits of listening for the sake of our partner and others we communicate with on a daily basis¹.

Bad habit	What it is?	How it can make someone feel
Interrupting	Expressing your own point of view before the other person has finished speaking.	Discouraged. Frustrated. As if my point of view doesn't matter.
Giving unasked for advice	Jumping in to the conversation to 'fix' the other's problems.	Belittled. All I wanted was a sympathetic ear.
Being critical	Criticism, blame and defensiveness. Judging a situation.	Crushed. Not accepted for who I am. Not good enough.
Reassuring	Inappropriate or <i>constant</i> reassurance that everything will be ok. Misplaced humour.	Stifled. My feelings aren't taken seriously.
Looking away	Not making eye contact shows you are not really listening	I feel rejected.
Telling my own story	Telling your own experiences instead of listening.	Put down. Hurt. I feel like I don't matter.
Rationalising	Having an answer for everything.	Put down. Hurt. I feel like I don't matter.

A B C of good listening

Good listening is something that can be learned². It isn't easy and it takes practice. It may also feel unnecessary when we are discussing the football results or the latest storyline in our favourite 'soap', but it can make the world of difference if we are listening to our partner talk about a particularly difficult day at the office, or with the children, or sharing our feelings about in-laws, money worries or a problem.

A good listener is actively engaged with the speaker in order to understand the main point of what they are trying to communicate. They are not just passively waiting for the speaker to finish; they are showing the speaker that they want to hear what he/she has to say.

A Attention:

A good listener gives his/her full attention to the words, i.e. what is being said. He is listening to **how** things are said and what feelings and needs are beneath the surface. He is also paying attention to **what isn't** being said - to silence.

A good listener will also be picking up signals from body language. Just as we listen with more than our ears, we communicate with our whole body. Our body language reflects what is going on inside: so if we are feeling angry it shows as a rigid posture and clenched fists; if defensive, we may fold our arms across our chest; if content, our body posture will be relaxed and open; if we are expressing honest feelings, then our body language will reveal it. Similarly, if we are trying to cover up our feelings we should be aware that most people would intuitively sense something isn't quite right.

B Be Connected:

A good listener uses all his/her senses: ears to hear, good eye contact, relaxed facial expression and body posture show we are attentive and have a heart that cares and a mind to understand.

C Check understanding:

A good listener checks his/her understanding of what is being said. So from time to time, the listener may repeat back to the speaker what they have just heard. Experts call this 'reflecting back'. The listener may also ask one or two questions to clarify his understanding of a situation or of the other's feelings. Then if there are misunderstandings, the speaker can put their point across in another way. This doesn't mean interrupting the speaker with our views. It does mean asking an appropriate question at the right moment

The gift of being a good listener, a gift which requires constant practice, is perhaps the most healing gift anyone can possess, for it allows the other to be, enfolds them in a safe place, does not judge or advise them, accepts them as they are without desiring to change them, and communicates support at a deeper level than words.

Gerard Hughes

Questions to help you develop your listening skills

1. How do you feel when someone is really listening to you?
2. Look at the table of bad habits together. It's easy to spot someone else's bad habits. Can you spot your own?
Agree an action point to help you 'break' your own habit
3. Read A B C of good listening together. Now practice it. Take turns to be the one speaking and the one listening.
When you are the speaker tell your partner about a recent experience and how you felt about it (e.g. a party, holiday or an accident)
When you are listening practice 'reflecting back' to check your understanding.

¹ Based on principles taught by the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation. Used with permission.

² For more information contact the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation, Whitehill Chase, Bordon, Hampshire, GU35 0AP. Tel: 01420 478121. Web: www.acornchristian.org