



How to Become a **Better Listener**

Learn to communicate better, improve your relationships and learn more about yourself by listening more closely to others.

You probably have at least two kinds of friends in your life: the friend you call when you want to meet for coffee or a shopping trip, and the friend you call when you need to talk. You may not spend as much time with the second friend, but chances are, you treasure their friendship—and their focused silence when you need someone to really, truly listen to you.

In fact, most relationship experts agree that talk is cheap—it's listening that's rare and valuable. It enables you not only to hear what the other person is saying, but also to gain insight into their thoughts and feelings. And for the speaker, that level of understanding translates into concern and respect. Unfortunately, listening isn't as easy as it sounds. Thanks to schedules filled to the brim with family, work and social commitments, multitasking has become more common, and often it can be hard to devote complete and full attention to a conversation.

Another barrier to listening is our wiring: Most of us take in only about half of what's being said during a conversation, according to the International Listening Association, a Falls River, Wisconsin, organization dedicated to the study and development of listening skills. Research shows that we speak at 125 to 150 words per minute, yet think at closer to 500 words a minute. So with nearly 400 words of thinking time available to us each minute that we're listening, drifting off is a pretty natural reaction.

While it can be tough to focus at times, it's a skill worth cultivating. Here are some tips:



1 DIMINISH DISTRACTIONS.

When you're distracted or preoccupied during a conversation, chances are you aren't taking in everything that's being said.

One of the most important ways to listen—especially in this age of computers, cell phones, televisions and radios—is to simply shut off nearby devices and bring your full attention to the situation.

2 ASK, DON'T TELL.

It's natural to want to help the other person by offering a solution or sharing a perspective on a problem. But no matter how carefully you may have

weighed your response, experts agree that once advice is offered, communication is likely to shut down. Instead, try posing questions that extend the conversation, rather than cut it off. You might simply tell the speaker, "Take me through the steps that led you here."

3 MAKE EYE CONTACT.

Whenever possible, talk about important things in person—and look into each other's eyes during the conversation.

When you make eye contact, the lines of communication are deepened, and the speaker feels better-heard. And don't overthink things, as it's impossible to listen if you're figuring out how to respond at the same time.

4 FILL IN THE BLANKS.

When telling a story, it can be easy to leave out parts or skip around in time. Perfect your listening skills by noting gaps and inconsistencies, and take

the perspective of an objective observer by asking follow-up questions when something doesn't make sense to you.

5 READ BETWEEN THE LINES.

Real listening means tuning in to the emotional content underneath the words. Take note of nonverbal cues, such as voice inflection, facial gestures and body movements. If anything seems out of sync with what the speaker is saying, simply ask, *"What are you feeling?"*

6 BE PATIENT.

Always allow the speaker's words to sink in before responding. This allows both you and them to consider what they've said and provides an opportunity for the speaker clarify or add to any parts of the story. While embracing the silence may seem like a passive approach to solving a problem, it's actually an effective and empowering part of the listening process. You're telling the other person that she has something worthy to share, and that you are open and willing to understand them better. And that statement, you'll soon see (and hear), speaks volumes.