

Top Tips

Listening

Active listening

Most people are poor listeners. It has been estimated that we only retain as little as 20% of what we hear, even a short while afterwards, and this drops to 10% or less after a longer period. If you are coaching or counselling someone, it is even more important to listen, and to a greater extent than you would in a normal conversation. Having spent time preparing and asking good questions, you must be able to absorb and retain the answers to your questions, and the implications of these. This whole process is called 'active listening'.

Listening

It has been suggested that when we listen, the meaning is affected:

7%	by the words	38%	by the tone of voice	55%	by the body language
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This makes it vitally important to listen carefully to the:

- 👂 **Words** the speaker chooses and uses – do any of these sound out of keeping with the rest of the conversation?
- 👂 **Tone** - when someone is anxious the throat muscles tighten and the voice pitch rises.
- 👂 **Volume** - an increase in volume usually means an increase in emotion; a fall in volume may indicate that they are nervous or reluctant to speak.
- 👂 **Speed** – people tend to speak more quickly when they are angry or excited, and more slowly when they are reluctant to discuss a topic or are thinking.
- 👂 **Emphasis** put on certain words - how does that affects their meaning; for example is the speaker being sarcastic about a topic?

You will also find it helpful to interpret the body language and other clues in the way the words are delivered. Practise by watching television soaps with the sound off!

- 👁️ **Do they appear relaxed** and confident at one point, then tense up when a certain word is used, or a certain topic is mentioned?
- 👁️ **Do they use open gestures** for the majority of your discussion, then fold their arms or cross their legs as though rejecting a certain thought or suggestion?
- 👁️ **Watch for eye movements;** many people will look upwards and to one side when thinking, but downwards if they would rather avoid the question.
- 👁️ **Do they take time to answer,** such as taking a sip of water to play for time rather than giving an immediate answer?

Further tips

Keep an open mind

- 👂 **Don't pre-judge or switch off** just because you don't like the sound of the first few words you hear.
- 👂 **If what you are hearing sounds critical** you may focus on how you can defend yourself rather than what is being said.

Top Tips

- 👂 **If you do not like the speaker**, their manner, appearance, accent etc., you may dismiss what they are saying as worthless.
- 👂 **If the views expressed are different from your own** you may not hear what is said, as you stop listening whilst you plan your response.
- 👂 **If you rapidly classify** a topic or a speaker as right or wrong, good or bad, it prevents you from hearing all the facts, or you may accept everything they say without question.
- 👂 **Don't be put off** by their dress or appearance, mannerisms, use of language, accent or sound of their voice, or a speech impediment.

Consider the environment

- 👂 **Choose somewhere quiet** with comfortable temperature and lighting where you can sit in reasonable comfort.

Ignore distractions

- 👂 **Concentrate** on what the speaker is saying, not on what's going on outside. Don't keep reading your notes or looking at your watch. Divert the phone, and put up a 'do not disturb' notice. Avoid fidgeting, doodling, paper shuffling and pen clicking, as this can be distracting for the speaker.

Take notes

- **Not full text**; these are notes to remind you later of what you've heard. We speak four times quicker than we write, so you won't be able to get it all down.

Reflect

- 👂 **Repeat back** what you hear - use phrases like 'So you feel that...' to make sure you understand what the speaker feels about what he or she is telling you.

Summarise

- 👂 **Have periodic reviews** of what you've just heard; 'So where we've got to is...' This will help you establish the facts of the subjects in a logical sequence.

Establishing rapport

A large part of active listening is to make the other person feel that you are taking in what they say, and want them to carry on talking. This is essential in a counselling or coaching discussion. As well as reflecting and summarising, you can achieve this by:

Good posture

- 👂 **Leaning forward slightly** and nodding now and then shows interest.
- 👂 **Keep an open posture** to encourage the speaker.

Eye contact

- 👁 **Keep your eyes on them** - not staring them straight in the eye all the time, but also on their hands when they gesture, or on any papers or other items they may show you.

Responding

- 🗨️ **Not interrupting**, but putting in 'verbal punctuation' such as grunts, 'right', 'OK', 'mmm's, and 'uh-huh's shows attention. Fortunately this comes naturally to most people, but don't allow this to be taken as agreeing with something when you only intended to respond.

Allow silence

- 🗨️ **You don't have to fill it** with more questions, and the other person needs time to think about their response.
- 🗨️ **Remember, silence is golden** – we are given two ears and one mouth, so use them in that proportion.

For related topics see Top Tips:

- ➔ **Questioning**