

## **The Gentle Art of Listening: Some Roadblocks That Interfere With Effectively Hearing Other People**

How often do you really listen to what other people are saying to you? How often do you feel like others are really hearing what you are trying to say? Listening is an absolutely critical skill in human relationships. Unfortunately, we often don't listen very well, especially to the people who are most important to us. Our minds race ahead to what we think they should do or we may be preoccupied with what's going on for us at that moment in our own lives. Without effective listening, there is no real communication or emotional connection to the people around us. This article will focus on listening: what it is, what gets in the way of our listening to others, and how to do it more effectively.

The importance of effective listening really became apparent to me early in my relationship with my partner, Jane, when she and I planned to spend a weekend at a bed and breakfast spot in Wisconsin. We had talked about our plans for the weekend and it seemed like everything was set. I had a few errands to run on the Saturday we were leaving and I wanted to try to get them accomplished prior to actually going. They ended up taking a bit longer than I had hoped but I still felt okay about the time we were departing because I thought we had left our departure time somewhat flexible.

I arrived at Jane's condo at about 2:30 in the afternoon. I was surprised to find her angry and agitated that I was "so late." I told her immediately that I was under the impression that we hadn't really set a specific time to leave town. But her recollection was very different from mine. She had expected to leave by 10 or 10:30 that morning and had been waiting for me ever since that time at her condo. For several minutes, we continued to go back and forth about what we recalled about our previous discussion (I really didn't want to be "wrong" at the time about what we had agreed on). Eventually, however, with both of us trying to talk over the other, the situation became heated and Jane threw up her hands in exasperation and started to walk out of the room. I began to imagine an emotionally distant weekend together and finally made the decision to really tune into what she was trying to say to me. At that point, I said to her, "*Okay, I'll just listen.*"

Then I shut my mouth and let her speak. She told me how disappointed she was that we were getting such a late start because she had really been looking forward to the time away and to just spending time with me. As she talked, my impatience and irritability with her evaporated and it was replaced with sadness that I had disappointed and hurt her. I had been so busy defending myself and my position to avoid being "wrong" that I hadn't been at all open to her

perspective and what was behind her initial response of frustration and anger with me. My desire to win the argument had simply pushed us farther away from one another at this important time.

I wasn't sure what had actually been said in our planning meeting but it didn't really matter anymore. What was important was doing my best to hear what she was saying and moving beyond this conflict to truly enjoying our weekend together. When I stopped talking and tuned into what she was really trying to communicate, I opened the door to understanding how she felt and how she saw what was happening in our relationship at that moment. When I did this, I felt bad. I had hurt this woman I loved (her goal was actually to have more time with me over our weekend). Jane didn't expect an apology but, after a half hour on the road, it also became clear that I needed to do this as well, for her and for me. We had a close and fun-filled weekend together after that. But it probably wouldn't have been that way if I hadn't been willing to really work to listen to what she was trying to tell me.

For me, this situation captures the essence of the power that listening can have in a relationship with another person. Without it, there is no problem-solving, no conflict resolution, and no genuine emotional connection.

Listening is a commitment to other people and to your relationship with them. Real and effective listening is never a passive process (that's why it's often referred to as "active listening.") It takes energy and sharply-focused concentration. It is a commitment to actively work to understand what others think, feel, want, need, and how they see and experience their world. This means turning down the "noise" and "static" in our own heads and setting aside, temporarily, our own beliefs, interpretations, expectations, insecurities, and self-interest so that we can truly attend to and hear what others are trying to say to us. Many of us don't particularly like doing this and, often, we aren't very good at it. We have our way of looking at things and we say to ourselves, *"that's just the way life is and should be."* But others don't necessarily see life in the same way that we do and our only way to truly enter their world is to remove the blinders we wear about the way things "are" and "should" be (from our perspective) and be open to their way of seeing the world.

Effective listening is also a compliment and a gift to others. When you really tune into someone else and their world, you saying in a very real and tangible way: *"Your life, your feelings, your beliefs, and your experiences are important to me," "I really care about what's happening with you and to you,"* and *"You are a worthwhile and special person to me."* What powerful messages to communicate to others, especially the people you care about! Listening is a tangible and practical way to actually demonstrate caring and love in an ongoing way in your day-to-day contact with the important people in your life.

Active listening means listening with empathy, recognizing that you and the other person share the same sorts of human struggles and that “we are all in this life together.” It means listening with openness, trying to understand others from their perspective, not your own. It means listening with genuineness, which involves being and acting “human” versus being a judgmental, dismissive, condescending, arrogant, and grandiose “know it all.” And finally, it means listening with respect, making sure that our verbal and non-verbal responses communicate a basic attitude of caring, positive regard, and valuing of the other person’s unique thoughts, feelings, experiences, and their potential desire to change and grow as a human being. This also involves an understanding that people have the right and responsibility to make their own choices, take actions they deem to be appropriate, and then experience any consequences that may arise from the decisions that they make.

If listening can be so helpful, what gets in the way of this process occurring more frequently? Many attitudes and behaviors can interfere with effective listening. The following section highlights just a few examples of how listening can head in the wrong direction.

The first and one of the biggest roadblocks to effective listening is becoming defensive and simply reacting to what the other person is saying. I felt badly when I first saw Jane’s anger as I walked into her home. I didn’t want her to be angry with me and I didn’t want to be “wrong,” especially since we were going away together for the weekend. I certainly didn’t want her to feel that anger very long and so I reacted and went on the offensive, arguing about the specifics of the situation (from my perspective) rather than really attempting to understand how she was feeling and what she was trying to communicate with me at that moment. She felt sad and frustrated that we would have less time together because she actually wanted to spend time with me. That is actually a very good thing! Her feelings about me and her desire to be with me were strong positives about our relationship but if I had continued as I had started in our interaction, that would have been completely lost in the “blow-up” and the hurt feelings that undoubtedly would have followed.

Another roadblock to effective listening is advice-giving and a “fix-it” mentality. This is especially true for us as men since being “fixers” is often one of the things we are supposed to do in this culture. In some areas, it works well. In intimate relationships, it generally leads to significant problems and is a recipe for disaster. The attitude that “*I know what’s best for you and so you need to do what I say*” is a “dead-end street.” It discounts the idea that other people have the ability to come up with their own solutions for what is going on in their lives. The reality is that people want and deserve the right to decide what works for them. If you have your own agenda for everyone around you, people will soon pick this up. The more we try to force our advice and suggestions on others, no matter how “helpful” they seem to us, the less they will feel we are truly interested in whatever they are actually experiencing and trying to share.

A third roadblock is making judgments about what the other person is saying. This can take many forms but basically involves not having an open mind, either because of your own insecurity or your rigid way of looking at the world. It may be applying negative labels to the other person (either unspoken or actually stated) like “*You must be a real loser,*” “*What a wimp,*” or “*what’s wrong with you?*” It could be discounting, minimizing, or denying the other person’s feelings by saying things like “*You shouldn’t feel that way,*” “*No one thinks like that*” or “*How could you feel something like that?*” It could mean “mind-reading” which means that you are unwilling to take the other person at “face value” and then trying to get at what you believe is “really going on” for them (perhaps thinking to yourself, “*He/she doesn’t have a clue about this situation...what’s really happening is...*” In any case, these types of behaviors communicate loudly to the other person that they are somehow defective, “bad,” and “wrong.” These actions quickly stop the communication process in its tracks.

A fourth roadblock is relating too much of what the other person says to your own life experiences. This means that everything the other person shares seems to remind you of something you have thought, felt, or done yourself. You then make the assumption that you know exactly what they are thinking and feeling because of your own similar experiences, you expound on these experiences, moving the focus from what the other person is trying to communicate, and then using the solution that you used to tell them what they need to do in their own situation. This may lead to interrupting the other person, completely taking over the conversation between the two of you, or rambling on with personal examples which make it very clear that you’re not really interested in them or their particular situation. In fact, in a very self-centered way, you’re only focused on yourself, your experiences, and your life.

A final roadblock is not really being present emotionally or mentally when someone is trying to communicate with you. You may be feeling tired and stressed. You might be preoccupied or overwhelmed with some issue in your own life. You could be involved with another activity like watching TV, reading the newspaper, or looking at your cell phone or tablet and thus be focused somewhere else. People will notice when you’re “just going through the motions” and pretending to listen to them when you’re really not. This is a set-up for resentment and estrangement in a relationship.

Think about times in your life when you have made the effort to really listen to someone else. Often, we may not be able to remember many examples of this even occurring. But, when this did happen, these instances stand out as situations where we gave others the message that they were valued, special, and cared about. Often, there is a deep connection and others notice and feel grateful to us for offering this precious gift to them. You have the power to offer that gift on a consistent basis to the important people in your life. Make a commitment to yourself and to those other people that you will work hard to do just this!

**SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT THAT ARE RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE:**

**1) Think about a time in your life when you really made the effort to listen to another person.**

- a) What was happening in the situation and in that person's life?**
- b) How was the person feeling about the situation prior to talking with you?**
- c) How did you know that you were really listening to that other person?  
...What specifically did you do to focus on listening to him/her?**
- d) How did the other person respond to your efforts to listen to them?**
- e) How do you think the person felt about you after you had listened to them?**
- f) Afterward, how did you feel about your interaction with that other person?**