Active Listening Exercise

Just Listen

Practise Listening Without Planning Your Reply or Talking Too Much

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www.GoodListeningSkills.org
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7 Minute Read

Exercise Length: 25 minutes

Overview

Listening for understanding is the goal of active listening (see my post on Listening with Empathy). A key action that we need to perform in order to achieve this is goal is actually listening - no talking, no interjecting, no interrupting and diverting, no daydreaming or planning our response. Just focused attention on the speaker so that we can absorb what they’re saying. This is an important active listening skill.

The objective of this exercise is to help you quieten those urges to butt in, and to begin shifting your internal dialogue (aka self-talk) from focusing on yourself and what you want to say next, to focusing on the speaker and trying to understand what they are saying.

A Key Principle

To be a good listener, active listening skills must become habitual. Conversations move too fast to be thinking, “Hmm...which active listening technique do I need to use now?”

Habits are developed by repeatedly weaving multiple tiny, almost trivial actions into our lives until that behaviour sticks. [1] The behaviour is further reinforced by reflecting on the effectiveness of each step and tweaking those tiny steps accordingly. [2]

Active listening is a combination of several actions in addition to just listening, such as asking open-ended questions and confirming our understanding.
But we need to start somewhere. So, the purpose of this active listening exercise is to help make the ‘tiny’ action of just listening second nature to you as another step towards developing habitual listening skills.

**Here’s What’s Involved**

Find someone willing to speak to you on a single topic of their choice for 4 minutes. Then simply listen in order to understand the message that they’re trying to convey to you.

You are not allowed to say anything while they’re talking — no comments, no questions, no verbal back-channel signals (“mhm”, “aha”, “uh-huh”, etc). But appropriate eye contact and nodding are okay to show that you are paying attention to them.

Just listen in silence and try to understand the speaker by answering in your own mind, questions such as:

- “What aspects of the speaker’s message most interest them?”
- “What aspects most interest you?”
- “What is the main theme(s) of their message?”
- “What are the key takeaways from the speaker’s message?”
- and so on.

At the end of 4 minutes, paraphrase in your own words the main points that you think you heard the speaker say - they should remain quiet while you’re paraphrasing. Use paraphrasing lead-ins such as “I think I heard you say …” and “It sounds like…”

Once you've finished paraphrasing, the speaker can then correct and clarify where necessary and you may ask follow-up questions if needed.

Finish up by discussing the exercise with the speaker. Use the discussion points below.
Set Up

1. Invite a trusted person to help you with this exercise (e.g. a family member, friend, or a work colleague). Ask someone who is also keen on developing their listening skills. Say something like, “Hey, I’m keen on developing good listening skills. I need someone to help me with a listening exercise. Can you help? It will take no more than 25 minutes.”

2. Organise to meet in a quiet place away from other people where you and your volunteer can relax and not be distracted by other people.

3. Take a list of conversation starters (see below) just in case the speaker’s mind goes blank.

What to Do

1. Meet at your agreed ‘quiet place’.

2. Limit the whole exercise to 25 minutes.

3. Describe the exercise to your volunteer - what they need to do and what you will be doing (see Here’s What’s Involved above)

4. Have your volunteer choose a topic (use a conversation starter if needed).

5. Set a 4 minute timer and begin listening/talking.

6. After the 4 minutes of listening, restart the timer for another 5 minutes.

7. Then briefly share what you think you heard the speaker say (i.e. paraphrase their message as described above) and clarify any misunderstandings.

8. After the 5 minutes is finished, used the remaining time to have a follow-up discussion.
Follow-up Discussion

Discuss the following:

- Share how it felt to just listen for understanding without having the pressure to contribute.

- Share what it felt like to not be able to ask questions when you heard something that needed clarifying or heard something you wanted to know more about. What questions might you have asked?

- Discuss what happened to your internal dialogue.

- Did you actually need to plan your response? Why? Why not?

- Discuss how the speaker felt to have your full attention.

- Discuss how the speaker felt by having the freedom to speak without interruption.

- Discuss anything else that impacted you both.

- Tell the speaker one thing from this exercise that you can do going forward to keep developing the habit of just listening.

END OF ACTIVE LISTENING EXERCISE
Resource - 14 Conversation Starters

Your volunteer can use one of these conversation starters if they can't think up their own topic.

1. Who is your oldest friend? Where did you meet them? What do you appreciate about them?

2. What were you really into when you were a kid? Why did it capture you? Discuss.

3. What three words best describe you? Why?

4. What would be your perfect weekend? Talk your way through that perfect weekend.

5. If you opened a business, what kind of business would it be? What draws you to that idea?

6. What is the strangest dream you have ever had?

7. What is a controversial opinion you have?

8. Who in your life brings you the most joy? How?

9. Who had the biggest impact on the person you have become? How has your life changed because of them?

10. What are some things you want to accomplish before you die? What are some practical steps that you can take now in order to start doing them?

11. Describe a book that's had an impact on your life. What was the impact and how is it affecting you today?

12. If you could call up anyone in the world and have a one hour conversation, who would you call? What would you talk about?

13. Time freezes for everyone but you for one day. What do you do?

14. If your mind was an island, what would it look like? Walk me around that ‘island’.

Special thanks to C.B. Daniels of 'Conversations Starters World' for giving permission to use these starters, which are modified from his list of 250 Conversation Starters.
Notes

[1] You can learn more about habit formation using tiny steps from Dr. BJ Fogg, Behavior Scientist at Stanford University, www.foggmethod.com. His free online Tiny Habits course (5 days, 3 minutes per day) is worth doing (www.tinyhabits.com).


[3] Cover image credit: Photo by Tommy Lisbin on Unsplash

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