

Active Listening Overview

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the concept and components of active listening. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Listening vs. Active Listening
2. Active Listening in Conflict Resolution

1. Listening vs. Active Listening

When we think about listening, we tend to think of it as someone simply hearing what we said; the focus of listening is centered on our ears and whether or not our message is audible to the other person.

Active listening, on the other hand, involves a lot more than simply hearing the actual words that somebody said. Instead, active listening involves really understanding the message and letting the speaker know you understood it.

We communicate whether or not we are giving someone undivided attention or are being present in the moment through both our verbal and nonverbal responses.

In today's world where everybody is moving at a fast pace, it's easy to be listening while we're doing other things; however, we need to make sure we are communicating our attention nonverbally.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you're not looking at the person speaking, the speaker knows you're distracted. Think about what it's like when you talk to somebody, and they are distracted by other things. You feel like you have half this person's attention, and you might speak louder or repeat yourself because you're not getting a response from the person to let you know you were heard.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Conversely, little children, and babies in particular, are totally in the present moment. They don't live anywhere else. You know when you have a child's attention because the child will just sit and stare at you.

While we as adults don't need to stare at somebody to show that we are attentive, we do need to return to the present moment because letting go of all the distractions around us is an enormously important part of active listening.

Nonverbally, we can do this through eye contact and body language, but it's also important to communicate our attention verbally.

Giving **feedback** to the speaker is a way of showing that we heard the message in the way the speaker intended it.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A friend is talking to you about a situation that just happened. Your friend says, “My car's been in for repair this whole week, so Joe said he'd take me to work. Well, he picked me up late. I got into work late, and I had to get to a meeting on time. I ran in two minutes late, and everybody looked at me. Joe was supposed to pick me up again after work, and he said he'd call me if he couldn't. I never heard from him, so I'm standing on the street corner. I text him and call him, but he doesn't answer. He just left me on the street corner, and I still haven't even gotten ahold of him. I had to take a cab home.”

There's a lot there, so you want to let your friend know that you got it all: “So you were late to work, and it was a long day. Then you were standing on the street corner, and you tried to get hold of him, and you didn't hear back?”

That type of feedback is one way of letting the listener know you got the content part of what they said; however, it's also important to let the person know that you're listening with the heart because active listening involves empathy.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the situation with your friend, you might say something like, “Wow, it sounds like you've been under a lot of stress. First the car, then being late to work, and having no ride home. That sounds really hard.” You're now reflecting back some of the emotion that you heard.



BIG IDEA

While listening involves simply hearing what someone said, active listening involves the undivided attention that comes from listening with your whole being and giving feedback to the speaker.



TERMS TO KNOW

Active Listening

A conflict resolution technique in which the listener sends constant feedback to the speaker, indicating that the speaker's message has been received and understood or interpreted as intended.

Feedback

Indications that a message has been received and interpreted in a particular way.

2. Active Listening in Conflict Resolution

Active listening is a very important skill in conflict resolution. When the parties involved in the dispute each have a side to share, the conflict resolver needs to actively listen as both parties speak to let them know that they are heard and understood.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Perhaps it's a dispute between neighbors. One neighbor is very upset because there's been a lot of loud noise, and a lot of cars on the street blocking the driveway. She can't get out of the driveway, and the dogs are barking late into the night.

As a conflict-resolver, you might reflect back what you've heard here through active listening: “So you're telling me that there's been a lot of noise, and traffic blocking your driveway, and dogs barking late at night.” You are letting the person know you've heard this, and you go through this same process for both

parties.

Even outside of a formal conflict resolution process, active listening is something you can use in your own life when somebody's upset. Rather than react in defense, active listening requires that you seek to understand before being understood.

You want the speaker to know you heard what they said, and this involves **suspending judgement**.

Suspending judgement means that you are listening without evaluating:

- The speaker
- What the speaker is saying
- The situation

Suspending judgement is not the same as agreeing; you may agree or disagree with the person speaking. Rather, suspending judgement simply means that before you get into your response, you are letting the speaker know that you understand what they said, and how they feel in the present moment.



TERM TO KNOW

Suspending Judgement

Refraining from evaluation of an idea, situation or person.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **active listening**, and how it is different from listening because instead of simply hearing what the speaker said, active listening involves communicating that you understand both the contextual and emotional aspects of the message. You now understand that **active listening in the conflict resolution process** is very important because both parties need to feel that their positions are not only heard but understood as well. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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