



Mountains Into Molehills

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[Mountains Into Molehills](#) is a free internet book which aims to build understanding of self and others. It integrates relevant theory with practical step by step guides to coping with stressful situations, and handling difficult situations assertively.

Chapter Five – Listening Skills

- Why Learn To Listen
- Self Assessment
- What stops us listening
- Why learn to listen
- Empathy: Summarising
- When you are not listening it shows
- Listening Skills – Do's
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- Non Verbal Communication
- Two poems about listening
- Getting Feedback on your listening skills
- Recommended Reading

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Listening Skills – The Key To Many Doors

Why learn to listen

Good listening skills are:-

- Key to us understanding others, how they feel, what they feel about us, and what they need from us
- The foundation of good interpersonal relationships: the key to being a desirable friend and to making friends: the key to being a good conversationalist.
- The key to influencing others; key to persuasion. When someone feels we don't care how they feel or what they think, that we don't understand them, they are unlikely to listen to what we have to say.
- Key in settling disagreements and resolving conflict A good example of this is when we get into an argument. If we can't wait for the other person to shut up so we can put our point of view then they will behave the same way and neither party will be hearing what the other is saying. To have any chance of winning an argument the other person has to feel that we are trying to understand their reasoning, trying to understand their feelings. Only if they feel we are listening to them will they listen to us.
- Highly therapeutic, the most powerful way of helping someone if you are not a trained counsellor. There is something magic about being truly listened to. Good listening skills are the basis for true friendship and being supportive when people most need it.

- Listening Skills are key to understanding how others are feeling towards us. By listening to the body language and non verbal messages which people are sending we get a clear idea of how they are feeling towards us. Armed with this understanding we can decide what, if anything, we want to do differently.
- Because empathetic listening has magic in it, it forms the foundation slab of most kinds of therapy. In fact, listening constitutes the biggest part of the activity in Person Centred [Rogerian] counselling. Even in the more interventionist approaches which involve diagnosis and treatment planning the counsellor must have advanced listening skills to be competent.

Perhaps you are a very good listener already?
So let's start with a simple Self Assessment!

Give yourself a tick for those statements where you can be confident that 'Yes' is you. Put a question mark where the statement is only partly true. Put a cross against those statements which are not you [or you don't understand].

1. People tell me that I am a good listener
2. I listen to the speakers non verbal communication with my eyes
3. I send non verbal signals to confirm that I am listening and make lots of eye contact [taking care to avoid staring]
4. I try to avoid sending 'I am not listening' non-verbal signals
5. I don't interrupt with advice, questions, and comments intended to make the speaker feel better
6. I don't finish people's sentences for them
7. I don't switch the subject to my topic until the other person has finished their point
8. I get people talking with open questions
9. My empathy skills are well developed
10. I'm comfortable with silences in a conversation
11. When people express different views to mine I don't dismiss their views, rather try to understand how they got to believe something different to me
12. When people say they are 'Fine' or 'OK' I look for their non-verbal confirmation before I believe them

Advanced Listening Skills

13. I have developed my self awareness to a point where I can monitor whether my reaction to what I hear is being distorted by my personal 'stuff'
14. I use summarising to check understanding
15. I search for the feeling behind the words and I reflect back to the speaker how I think they are feeling
16. I am comfortable with people who are somehow different to me, people of a different sex, sexual preference, generation, social group, race, colour, religion , creed, and with people who are disabled, or suffering debilitating illness

A Counsellor should get 16 ticks. A realistic goal in becoming a good amateur listener would be to get 10 or more

What Stops Us Listening

- When we meet people we instinctively form an initial impression of whether we like them or dislike them. We then subconsciously give them 'horns', or 'halo's'. This prejudice distorts our view and impacts on what we hear, and what we are thinking when they talk to us.
- We select unconsciously from what we hear, distort the content, according to our unique 'Map of the World', the set of beliefs about ourselves, others, and the world which has developed as a result of our unique life experiences, our parental influences, our education, and many other factors.
- We also translate things we have heard on the basis of our beliefs about life, about what is 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad', 'nice' or 'not nice' etc The unique interpretation we place on what we hear is prejudice, which can be positive or negative, 'horns' or 'halos'.

We need to be aware of this basic human tendency if we are to put our prejudices on one side and hear what is actually being said.

Examples of what stops us stops us listening

- We are thinking what to say
- We want to talk, not listen
- We find the person boring
- Listening requires concentration: its easy to drift off to private thoughts
- Our own mental state – nervousness, anxiety, anger, worries
- Our own physical state – headache, feeling ill, hangover, sleepless night
- We find their tone of voice a distraction – boring, pompous, aggressive, whining , narcissistic, etc
- We don't listen because we resent the values differences revealed by their remarks e.g. sexist, racist, homophobic etc or 'bad taste' humour.
- We think we can read minds so we don't to listen, let people finish their sentences, we think we know what they are going to say
- We are short of time: there is something we need to be getting on with
- We can't stand silences in conversation so we jump in and fill the gap
- We are irritated by excessive familiarity by the other party – e.g. inappropriate touching, use of 'love', 'darling', 'dear' 'mate'.
- They use words which 'get us going' such as
 - Orders 'You must' 'You must not'
 - Threats 'You had better', 'If you don't' 'Or else'.
 - Preach 'You should', 'When I was your age I used to..'
 - Lecture 'What you need to do is..' 'I wouldn't it that way if I was you..'
 - Judge 'You people are all the same...'
 - Provoke 'In my opinion...'

We judge on personal appearance, dialect, incorrect use of language.

We stick labels on from our past experiences, good and bad, of people who look, dress, talk, behave in a way that reminds us of the person we are listening to. Unfortunately this 'transference' is often at a subconscious level so we are unaware that it is affecting our judgement.

Empathy is key to good listening

- Empathy is not the same as sympathy.
- Empathy is trying to see the point of view of someone even when they have done something you disapprove of, somebody you are angry with; somebody who has brought a problem on themselves.
- It may be that you would find it difficult or impossible to feel sympathy for that person but empathy would help you understand that person's point of view.

Here are some useful ways of thinking about empathy

- Putting yourself in the other person's shoes
- Seeing things from their point of view
- Getting on the same train and sharing their journey
- Entering the inner world of the other person and seeing things from their point of view

Being empathic is not enough to be a good listener – you need to respond in such a way that the other person feels understood. There is great value in summarising in small doses understanding of what is being communicated as the conversation proceeds, and at the end. If we have got it wrong when we summarise the other person can correct us. If we have got it right the other person is reassured that we are listening.

There is no better way to learn to listen than doing a Counselling Skills course!

When we are not listening it shows

- We don't make eye contact
- We don't match our body language to what is being communicated e.g. we may smile when we should be displaying concern, keep a straight face when the speaker has said something humorous
- We don't ask for more information when someone mentions something important to them
- We 'close down' the other person by introducing things we want to talk about, talking about us and ours.
- We may fidget, yawn, look at our watch
- We do other things while the other person is talking e.g. reading something, answering the phone, breaking off to talk to other people, letting other people interrupt
- We compare the other person's problem to our own experiences. We say 'I understand how you feel' when they know we don't
- We patronise the other person, talk authoritatively as if they don't know
- We jump to conclusions and don't check out our conclusions
- We don't give the other person time to think – if they pause we jump in
- We go in for mind reading, assuming we know what they are about to say
- We assume they are feeling the way we would in that situation

Listening Skills – DO

- Use your eyes to Listen. What is their body language telling you? You may find that their body language tells a different story to their words. If it does, remember that the body language is more reliable because words are often used to hide the way we feel but the body tells the truth.
- Stay in the 'Here and Now' – don't let your thoughts drift to some other time, place, or issue. This can be very difficult because something the other person says may spark off a thought in your mind.
- Try to empathise with the other person – to see things from their viewpoint. Try to understand what it feels like in their shoes. You don't have to agree – just understand the way they think and feel.
Be curious, how did they get to think like that?
- Ask for further information – this will help you understand and reassure the other person that you are interested and listening.
- Have a clock where you can see it without it being obvious that you are keeping a check on the time.
- Use your eyes to stay in touch by eye contact with the other person.
- Watch out for your prejudices good and bad. These will cause you to hear only what you want to hear.
- Be sensitive, especially when probing for further information.
- Check for understanding: summarise your understanding as you go along.
- Ask open questions which cannot be answered with a simple 'Yes' or 'No' e.g. 'What did you like about it? [open] versus 'Would you recommend it? [closed – can be answered 'yes' or 'no']
- Mirror the way the other person is feeling.
WHEN SAD People need to feel that you are there for them
WHEN ANGRY People need to be convinced that you understand
WHEN HAPPY People need us to share their joy.
WHEN SCARED People need reassurance.
- If sitting, sit in an equal, informal, receptive position on a chair of similar height and size as the other person. Try not to have a barrier between you [such as a table or desk].
- Match the way the other person is sitting [unless it is aggressive, or unusual.

When Listening DON'T

- Don't stop listening while you think of what to say next.
- Don't talk about yourself, your opinions, and your experiences, but even when you are you can still listen for their non verbal response.
- Don't rely on mind reading. Check your understanding frequently BUT watch what questions you are asking because this may switch the conversation onto you – they may feel obliged to listen to you first.
- Don't break silences too soon. It's not called pregnant silence nothing! See what happens when you wait a little longer than you normally would before breaking the silence.
- Don't rush the other person: interrupt – unless there is a fire!
- Don't fidget, glance at the clock, allow distractions to draw your eyes away: try to do two things at once
- Don't sit too relaxed: Invade their space by being too close for comfort.
- Don't stare, but do make frequent eye contact
- Don't make inappropriate physical contact with relative strangers [sometimes people need to have their hand held, a soothing touch on the shoulder, even a comforting hug. If in doubt – DON'T]
- Don't pretend to be listening by having a fixed smile, using an auto nod

Non Verbal Communication

How we disclose what we might rather not

Over 90% of all communication of emotions is non verbal. If you don't like somebody they know it – even when you would prefer they didn't!

Gestures:	Any action that sends a visual signal to an onlooker
Touch:	How, and where, we touch
Paralinguistic:	Those aspects that operate alongside the actual words themselves e.g. accent, tone of voice
Posture:	How we stand or walk
Facial clues:	Smile, frown, grimace, etc
Kinesics:	Messages sent by the way we move our body
Proxemics:	How close we let others get – and how close they let us get
Intuition	Their 6 th sense about us

Two poems which capture the essence of good listening

Please Listen

When my eyes, my gestures, my words, invite you to listen,
Please don't feel the need to offer me advice,
Or to try to say things to make me feel better.
Please don't say 'Should' or 'Shouldn't, Must or Can't,
I have heard these words too many times already in my life.
Please don't feel you need to solve my problems,
All I need is you to listen, be with me, and
Your gentle unjudging silence while I share my feelings.

When

When your eyes seek mine
I know that I have your interest and attention,
When you don't interrupt
I know that you are trying to understand me,
When you don't talk about yourself
I know that it is me you are interested in,
When you ask me to tell you more
I know that you genuinely want to understand,
When you confirm how you think I feel
I know whether or not you have understood me,
When you play back what you think I said
It gives me the chance to clear any misunderstanding,
When you don't let your thoughts drift away from me,
When you don't yawn, look at the clock, and fidget
I know that you are not bored with me,
When you stay in my inner world with me
It shows, and it comforts me.
When you let silences do their work
I know that you are not trying to rush away,
When you don't judge me
You open the door to understanding me,
When you are like this with me I know you truly care
And I feel the healing power of being listened to

Anonymous

Why not get some feedback on how good a listener you are?

Choose a friend who will give you a candid opinion and get them to fill this in. Perhaps you could do the same for them?

You send non verbal signals which tell me that you are listening

You don't send 'I am not listening' signals [such as fidgeting, looking at watch etc]

You use lots of eye contact

You don't interrupt with advice, or questions which interrupted my flow

You don't finish my sentences

You don't keep switching the subject to you and yours

You ask questions that keep me talking

I feel that you try hard to understand what I am saying

I feel heard, understood, when I talk to you

Your strongest listening points are:

Your main listening improvement opportunities are:

Starter Reading

- | | |
|---|---|
| First Steps In Counselling | Pete Sanders ISBN 1 898 059 51 9 |
| Person Centred Counselling
In Action | Dave Mearns & Brian Thorne
SBN 0 7619 6316 2 |
| Body Language | Allan Pease ISBN 0 85969 653 7 |
| Mountains Into Molehills – | Chapter 10 Understanding Counselling |
| Mountains into Molehills – | Chapter Four – Why Conflict Occurs &
What To Do About It |