



How to Really Listen

“Listening is one of the most common and important things that we do ...”

In an average day we spend almost half of our time listening. Listening is an essential part of communication. It is obviously a very important skill for people in ministry, yet one that is often underestimated. Understanding what stops us listening in some situations and the idea of “active listening” is an important first step to becoming a good listener.

WHAT STOPS US LISTENING?

There are several things that can stop us listening effectively. Consider the effect the following have on your ability to listen:

- not really caring about what you are being told
- being distracted by things in your own life
- not understanding what is being talked about
- being afraid of what you are being told
- having a strong opinion about a topic
- being tired when you are trying to listen
- being ill when someone is talking to you
- distracting noises
- an uncomfortable environment

WHAT IS ACTIVE LISTENING?

Active listening is not a debate. It is not trying to work out your argument and get your point of view heard. Neither is it simply sitting and listening without interruption.

Active listening is more than just listening carefully; it is showing obvious interest in what is being said and concern for the person saying it. It involves careful interaction.

Active listening is something you can learn.

**HERE ARE SOME IDEAS TO HELP YOU ACTIVELY LISTEN:**

1. As you begin, think about what might stop you from listening; the surroundings, the situation, your state of mind, and try to remove as many distractions as possible.
2. Start by stopping. Stop talking. Learn to leave silences. Sometimes silence is all it takes to allow the other person time to think and talk.
3. Consider your body language. Where are you sitting in relation to the other person? Are you making eye contact?
4. Show engagement. Nodding your head, smiling, and saying, “I see” and “Uh-huh” as the other person talks shows them you are listening.
5. Think about your tone of voice before you say something.
6. Make sure that you understand what the person is saying and it is also helpful to ask what they want to happen as a result of the conversation.
7. If you need to ask questions to clarify something, make sure you don’t sound like you are interrogating the other person. Don’t interrupt; wait for an appropriate gap in the conversation. Use open questions to encourage the person to talk more about an area. Use closed (yes / no) questions for clarification.
8. Using your own words, repeat to the person the main points of your discussion. Sometimes this is called paraphrasing. It helps you to be sure that you have understood what you are being told and gives the person a chance to correct you if you have it wrong.
9. Show empathy, empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes e.g. “it sounds like you are feeling angry” or “You must have felt xxx when xxx happened”. Avoid saying “I know how you feel” even if you have been through a similar experience, your response may be totally different to theirs.
10. Sometimes it helps to take notes, but it is difficult to do it without distracting the other person. If you have to take notes just write down key words and fill in the details later.
11. Finish the discussion by confirming what will happen next and then ask a question; “Is that OK with you?”