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Guidelines For Effective Listening



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Guidelines For Effective Listening

Effective listening is a skill that enhances relationships and is particularly important in the role of helping others. This ability allows us to effectively respond to people when they need guidance, comfort, advice, or to discuss repentance, confession, relationship issues, etc. The following Scripture verses help lay the foundation for the practical suggestions for effective listening below.

Proverbs 20:5, "Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out."

Proverbs 1:5, "A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels."

Proverbs 18:13, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him."

Psalms 19:14, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer."

Proverbs 25:11, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver."

Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."

James 1:19, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath."

Colossians 4:6, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man."

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. Prepare to listen.

- Listening is hard work. Lack of sleep, stress in your own life, how you are feeling, and many other factors can make it difficult to effectively listen.
- Your posture and position influence both your ability to listen and how you are perceived as a listener. For example, try sitting in a relaxed posture, but don't be too casual.
- If possible, prepare by reading about the issue that will be discussed. Informed listeners can often be more sensitive and able to listen better.

2. Paraphrase and encourage further sharing.

- Occasionally paraphrasing or repeating what the speaker said can also encourage further sharing by demonstrating that you are truly listening.
- Head nods, a phrase such as "uh-huh" or "tell me more about..." can encourage the other person to keep talking.
- Attentive posture and facial expressions also show that you are interested.

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3. Check your listening attitudes.

- People are more likely to listen to what you have to say when they feel like you have listened to what they have said to you.
- The more you listen without jumping to conclusions, the clearer your understanding.
- Recognize that it is very difficult for some people to feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable and share their inner concerns with someone else.
- Also, recognize the potential blessing that can be given simply by allowing someone to share their heart with someone who cares.
- Listening requires discipline.
- Listening is as important as speaking.
- You don't need to fill in every time of silence, even though sometimes it may feel uncomfortable. Often, people need time to think and compose themselves. Silence allows for this.

4. Be aware of both content and delivery.

- How the speaker communicates is as significant as what he or she says.
- Look for evidence of tears, trembling, posture shifts, change in voice pitch or speed, alterations in breathing rate, etc.
- Changes in nonverbal signs often indicate that the person is talking about an especially significant or sensitive topic.
- Remember that you can think faster than the other person can talk. As you listen, reflect on what you are seeing and hearing, evaluate what you have heard, and ask yourself what the speaker really is trying to communicate.

5. Be aware of your own emotions and reactions while listening.

- Listening thoroughly and "hearing someone out" does not mean you have to deny your own emotional reaction or that you necessarily agree with what is spoken.
- Don't stop listening because you feel uncomfortable or dislike what you are hearing. Rather, strive to be fully present with the individual and not allow your emotions to take over your logic.
- Reacting too quickly and rebutting a speaker's comment is a common error to avoid.
- Try not to interrupt.
- When someone is sharing information that is difficult for them to say out loud, providing them with an empathetic response can help them to reveal more information.

6. Resist distractions.

- Distractions can be external (e.g., what you hear or see) or internal (e.g., your mind wanders).
- When you notice that you are distracted, make an effort to shift your focus back to the person speaking.
- Paraphrasing or repeating back what the speaker says is a good way to help you stay "in tune" with the person.
- If you find yourself getting distracted more easily than normal, consider possible explanations for why and try to make adjustments.
- In order to effectively listen, it is important that your top priority of the moment is understanding the individual you are with at the time. It is a loving act to listen.

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7. Listen for themes.

- Topics, phrases, emotions, or names that come up repeatedly may be clues to significant issues.
- While themes usually consist of the things that a person brings up in the conversation, sometimes the key themes you need to focus on are what the person does not bring up.

8. Don't get carried away by your own curiosity.

- Your purpose in listening is to understand and help the other person, not to satisfy your own curiosity or personal needs.

9. As you listen, avoid “preaching,” lecturing, or arguing.

- People often shut down and stop listening in these situations.
- When people feel they are being lectured, it is common for them focus on formulating their own defensive response to you instead of listening.

10. Like Jesus did, use well-placed questions to draw out information.

- Avoid asking close-ended questions (questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”) as much as possible since these stifle conversation.
- Sometimes asking “how” rather than “why” is more appropriate. For example, asking, “How did you come to that decision?” rather than “Why did you make that decision?” can help the individual feel less defensive and helps them to be more open and honest.

1. Adapted from *How to Be a People Helper* by Gary Collins. Adapted 2015 by Apostolic Christian Counseling and Family Services. Can be freely copied and redistributed. Not to be sold.

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