

Active Listening

Active listening means you are genuinely interested in both hearing and understanding what the other person has to say. The listener pays full attention and takes time to verify what they've heard.

Active listening is purposeful listening, and says to the other person

"You're important to me!"

There are four strategies you can use to help you actively listen:

1. Open-ended questions
2. Minimal prompts
3. Paraphrasing
4. Summarising

1. Open-ended questions

By asking open-ended questions – ones that require more than a 1 or 2-word answer – you'll encourage the other person to speak freely and provide full and meaningful responses.

These type of questions usually start with:

"Tell me more about ...?"

"How did ...?"

"What do you think ...?"

Steer away from using "why" questions. The other person may feel like they have to justify what they've said.

2. Minimal prompts

Minimal prompts are a way of encouraging the other person to keep talking without interrupting their flow.

They can be both verbal and non-verbal.

Verbal prompts may include *"ok", "uh uh", "right", "hmm mm", "sure", "yep" and "yes"*.

Non-verbal prompts may include *nodding your head, maintaining eye contact and hand gestures*.

3. Paraphrasing

One of the most effective ways to make sure you've understood the other person is to paraphrase (using your own words), 'parroting' back what they've said.

When doing this, try to:

- Repeat the facts
- Put across their thoughts and beliefs
- Describe any feelings or emotions you believe they're experiencing
- Communicate what you think it is they want or need.

Try to convey not only the words you hear but the other person's feelings and motivations.

Don't worry if you've misinterpreted what has been said. You're simply checking in with them to make sure that you really understand:

e.g. *so the disagreement with your partner has made you feel really angry and upset and you feel like you are not being listened to. You need your partner to sit down with you, talk about what happened, and listen to your point of view without dismissing it?*

4. Summarising

Summaries are basically longer paraphrases. They provide an overview of what you've heard, and they are a useful way to bring together the key messages.

As per the situation when you paraphrase, don't worry if you haven't got it quite right.

It's another opportunity to check in and clarify what the other person meant to say:

e.g. *This situation has made you realise that you feel really undervalued and underappreciated in your relationship, and you feel like you haven't been respected or listened to for a long time. You feel like you can't continue in the relationship unless significant changes are made, but you're worried that your partner is too entrenched in their habits, and you feel like things get much worse when you're both drinking alcohol? You'd like to try some relationship counselling but also talk about changing your alcohol habits?*

Tips for hearing the whole message

- **Stop talking!** It's difficult to speak and listen at the same time
- Try to put the other person at ease. How we look at them, stand or sit impacts on how relaxed they will be
- Show them that you're interested. Look at them but don't stare
- Remove distractions. Give them your full attention
- Try to empathise with the other person, especially if they're telling you something personal or painful, or something you strongly disagree with
- Be patient and don't jump in
- Watch your own emotions – when we get angry or upset we tend to miss critical parts of the conversation. Listening extra carefully will help
- Ask lots of open-ended questions and seek clarification.