

Listening For Understanding & Asking Genuine Inquiry Questions Reading 25

[Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)

Essential to healthy relationships with family members, friends, partners, teachers, and employers is the skill of listening. We cannot develop deep, meaningful relationships without listening, nor can we successfully complete tasks at school and work without understanding what is expected of us. It is impossible to work through misunderstandings and conflicts in relationships without both individuals understanding each other's needs. In addition, no one will listen to us, try to understand us, consider what we are saying, and change their behavior to help meet our needs if we don't listen to them, try to understand them, consider what they are saying, and consider changing our behavior to help them meet their needs.

It is not only important that we listen to understand, but also that we communicate that we are listening, trying to understand, and considering what the other person is saying. We do that by active listening and asking genuine inquiry questions when we don't fully understand. This type of listening also helps develop empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand how others feel, see things from their point of view, and experience their world as if we were standing in their shoes. We can empathize with someone even if we disagree with them. Empathy allows people to build social connections with others and develop meaningful relationships.

Why Listening For Understanding Is Important

1. Listening builds trust
2. Listening builds relationships. People like others who listen to them. When we listen, we communicate that we are interested in them.
3. By listening, we can help others feel better. Sometimes, people need to vent or to problem-solve with someone else. Listening lets people get things off their chest, feel better about a situation, and sometimes identify what they want to do next.
4. We need to listen to understand others' expectations, including those of parents, teachers, employers, and partners.
5. It is essential that we listen and understand what others are feeling and why they feel that way, what they are thinking and why, and what their concerns, worries, and needs are if we want to work through misunderstandings and conflicts.
6. No one will listen to us, try to understand us, consider what we have to say, and possibly change their behavior to help us meet our needs unless we first do the same with them.
7. For all the reasons stated above, listening (and asking genuine inquiry questions) is essential to work through misunderstandings and conflicts in relationships.

Reasons Why We Don't Listen

It is essential to be aware of when we aren't listening so that we can bring our attention back to what the person is saying. Reasons why we don't listen include:

1. We are too preoccupied with what we are doing, thinking, or feeling.
2. We take mini-vacations. We listen for a while, then tune out, go into our heads, think about other things, and then tune back to what the person is saying.
3. We assume we know what the other person will say, so we don't need to listen.
4. If we are involved in a discussion, argument, debate, or conflict, we rehearse what we will say next.
5. We don't care what the person is saying, or we don't care about the person.
6. We don't try to understand what the person is saying because, on some level, we realize that we are wrong, that they may be right, or that they have a good point that we don't want to accept.
7. We feel defensive because the other person is right, and we need to admit that we did something that hurt them, and now we need to apologize and/or change our behavior.

Passive & Active Listening

Passive Listening

Passive listening involves attending to what the person is saying and nonverbally acknowledging that we are listening.

Passive Listening: Paying attention and showing concern:

1. Give the speaker your full attention and do not attend to anything else in your environment (e.g., phone, TV, radio, or other people talking).
2. Make direct eye contact if you feel comfortable
3. Leaning forward toward the speaker
4. Avoid interrupting, judging, or criticizing
5. Avoid crossing your arms. This may communicate that you feel defensive or angry or are not open to what they say.
6. Avoid clenching your fists. Keep your palms open.

Passive Listening: Using Nonverbal Skills & Brief Verbal Responses to Acknowledge the Speaker.

1. Nodding or shaking your head when appropriate.
2. Change your facial expression when appropriate (for example, showing concern or excitement).
3. Say things like “Yes,” “I see,” “Uh-huh,” “Mm,” or “Go on.”

Using Brief “Door Openers” To Get The Speaker To Say More. Examples of “door openers” include:

1. *“Would you like to say more about that?”*
2. *“Why don’t you say more about that?”*
3. *“It sounds like you are having strong feelings about that?”*
4. *“Do you want to talk about it?”*

Passive listening is not enough, however. A person can do all of the above, but still not listen and understand what someone is saying. As students, we have done all of the above while looking at the teacher and not hearing what they are saying. The only way to fully communicate that we are listening, trying to understand, and considering what the speaker is saying is to actively listen and ask genuine inquiry questions.

Active Listening

Active listening is more than just nonverbally acknowledging that we are listening. Active listening involves communicating that we are listening, trying to understand, and considering what they are saying. This is done by summarizing, in our own words, what the speaker said and identifying what we think they feel, even if they didn’t state it. It also involves asking genuine inquiry questions when we don’t understand.

Active Listening Involves Summarizing/Paraphrasing In Our Own Words What We Heard the Speaker Say & What We Think They Are Feeling & Why.

When summarizing what the speaker said, use phrases like:

1. *“It sounds like...?”*
2. *“It seems to me...?”*
3. *“It appears to me...?”*
4. *“I can see that you are...?”*
5. *“I get the impression that you are...?”*
6. *“Let me see if I understand...(your position, what you want me to do, why you are angry at me...etc.)?”*
7. *“It seems like you are feeling...?”*

8. *"It seems like you are feeling...because...?"*

9. Ask, *"Did I get that right?"* *"Did I hear you correctly?"*

When summarizing what the speaker said or what you believe they are feeling, always say it as a question. It invites them to continue and avoids making you seem like an expert on them and their feelings. Even if you are close to their feelings, they will probably correct you and continue speaking. For example: *"It seems like you are angry because I didn't do the laundry after I said I would?"* If the speaker is frustrated, a response may be: *"It's not that I am angry; it's that I'm frustrated because we've had this conversation multiple times, and I'm disappointed because now I don't have the shirt I wanted to wear tonight."*

As stated above, it is possible to use passive listening nonverbal skills and brief verbal responses without listening, trying to understand, or considering what the person is saying.

Summarizing/paraphrasing what we heard and what we think the person feels communicates that we are listening and that we understand. How else could we paraphrase and identify unspoken feelings?

Genuine Inquiry Questions

When we don't understand, understand completely, are confused, or need more information, it is important to ask genuine inquiry questions to help us understand. Examples of genuine inquiry questions include:

1. *I'm not sure I understand."*
2. *"I'm not sure I understand completely. Would you say some more about...?"*
3. *"How are you feeling about all of this?"*
4. *"Why are you feeling this way?"*
5. *"So, what happened that got you so upset?" (or "got you so excited, "made you so sad", etc.)*
6. *"What do you think is going on?"*
7. *"What do you think about that?"*
8. *"What makes you think that?"*
9. *"Can you say a little more about how you see things?"*
10. *"Tell me about what led you to that conclusion."*
11. *"Please say more about why this is important to you".*

After asking questions, summarize/paraphrase what the speaker said/felt, and continue to ask questions if you do not fully understand. Keep asking questions until you fully understand. If necessary, say what's still unclear or inconsistent to you.

When you think you fully understand, ask:

- *"Is there anything else?"* or
- *"Is there anything else I need to know to understand fully?"*

If you are involved in a misunderstanding or conflict with the speaker, other genuine inquiry questions include:

1. *"I know you and I see the situation differently. I would like to understand better how you see it. Would you be willing to share your point of view with me?"*
2. *"I want to make sure I understand your perspective". "Would you tell me...?"*
3. *"What impact have my actions had on you?"*
4. *"Can you say more about why you think this is my fault?"*
5. *"What would it mean to you if that happened"?*
6. *"Did I say or do something to make you feel this way?"*

If you feel blamed, attacked, or defensive during a conversation, summarize/paraphrase and ask genuine inquiry questions. This will slow things down and give you time to gather your thoughts and determine what you want to say next. Translate their attack into legitimate feelings and concerns. Try to understand what they are feeling and why.

Other examples of what to ask when feeling blamed, attacked, or defensive include:

- *"So, you are angry at me because...?"*
- *"So, you think I...?"*
- *"What led you to that conclusion?"*
- *"Please help me understand what is making you think this."*

Continue to ask questions until you fully understand their perspective. When you think you fully understand, ask:

- *"Is there anything else?"* or
- *"Is there anything else I need to know to understand fully?"*

Stages in Learning New Social Skills

When we learn new social skills like being an effective passive and active listener, skillful in asking genuine inquiry questions, and using "I Statements," it is important to remember that these are complex skills that we were not born with, and that, as important as they are, many people do not talk like this. As with any new social skill, most people go through the following stages before becoming proficient.

1. Feeling self-conscious and awkward.
2. Feelings of phoniness while using it. "This isn't me".
3. Skilled but mechanical.
4. It becomes automatic, and we don't even know we are doing it. We use it effectively; we have internalized it