

active listening



going beyond hearing the words that another person speaks; also seeking to understand the meaning and intent behind them

Despite the importance of listening skills, they're often sorely lacking in most business—and personal—settings! But what causes people to have such poor listening skills? How can we be so oblivious to our lack of attentiveness? Most importantly, how can we utilize strategies to improve our listening skills?

For one, most people are more concerned about what they have to say than what the other person is saying. As a result, whenever they're not talking, they're thinking about what they will say next.

However, listening takes concentration, and it is extremely difficult to hear what someone else is saying when you're busy formulating your own response or "multi-tasking".

Why is Active Listening Important? One of the most important types of listening skills, active listening, involves hearing what is said and noticing nonverbal communication. These silent messages—the speaker's facial expressions, posture, and other body language types—may send an entirely different message from the words that they speak. If you're wondering how to improve your listening comprehension skills, there are a few key listening skills exercises you can start using right away.

Always look at the speaker and maintain eye contact If you really want to improve your listening skills, be sure you're giving the speaker your undivided attention. Believe it or not, it's actually rude for you to text, check email, or perform other tasks while someone else is talking to you! Also, look at the speaker in the eye instead of focusing on other objects in the room.

Observe the speaker's body language This is a critical part of active listening. Does the speaker's body language match what is being said, or is it sending a contradictory message? If the two don't match, you may need to delve deeper to determine what's actually going on.

Use positive body language Occasionally nod, smile, or make other gestures that show that you're engaged in the conversation and understand the importance of listening skills.

Don't interrupt the speaker Most people intuitively understand that it's disrespectful to interrupt someone, but they don't often stop to think about the message that cutting them off actually communicates. A few of the things you're implicitly saying when you interrupt someone:

"I'm more important than you are."

"What I have to say is more interesting, accurate, or relevant."

"I don't have time for your opinion."

Listening effectively requires a commitment of time and effort. Taking the time to develop and improve listening skills at work can improve your communication level, increase the quality of your relationships, and decrease the potential for misunderstandings and mishaps.