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Listen Up!

Source: Rhonda Herrick, Extension Educator

Conversations happen daily where someone is talking and another is supposed to be listening. How often does the receiving person check his or her phone or look distracted in the midst of the conversation?

Maybe that person is nodding his or her head or even saying a few words. However, is listening truly happening? According to Psychology Today, only about 10 percent of us listen effectively.

Steven Covey identifies five poor listening styles:

1. Spacing out—ignoring them because the mind is wandering
2. Pretend listening—pretending to listen but still not paying attention
3. Selective listening—paying attention only to the part of the conversation that interests us
4. Word listening—listening only to the words being said and not paying attention to body language
5. Self-Centered listening—seeing everything from our own point of view

These listening styles can be detrimental to relationships and can create hard feelings. It may be easy to identify with one of these or maybe even all of these styles. What practices could be adopted to become a better listener?

- Look people in the eye. Do not look at the phone or a computer screen. Be fully engaged.
- If talking with a child, get on the child's level.
- Do not respond until someone is finished speaking.
- Watch for the nonverbal cues.
- Do not turn the conversation to make it about you.
- Try to understand the speaker's perspective.
- Respect feelings.
- Do not judge.
- Listen genuinely.

These skills take practice! In a busy world, it is easy to be distracted. Put down the phones, close the laptops, and focus on what truly matters: Relationships! During one-on-one conversations, even the presence of a mobile phone in hand or on the table sends a message that the person you are communicating with is competing with the priority of your phone messages and calls.

For more information on active listening, contact susan.harris@unl.edu at Kearney County Extension or Franklin County Extension. Download this helpful list of [barriers to active listening](#).

Barriers to Active Listening

Here are 12 different barriers to active listening. You will find that some are easy go-to's that people use over and over. Others are held in reserve for certain types of people or situations. All of them interfere with our ability to see actively listen and communicate with people.

1. **Comparing**-it is hard to listen when you are assessing who's more intelligent, more confident and more emotionally healthy. Many times, you are also trying to assess who has worked harder.
2. **Mind reading**-The mind reader doesn't pay much attention to what people say. In fact, they often distrust it. The mind reader pays less attention to words than to intonations and subtle cues to see through the truth. If you make assumptions about how people react to you, then you're probably wrong
3. **Rehearsing**-You don't have time to listen when you are rehearsing what you are going to say. Your whole attention is on the preparation and crafting of your next comment. You have a story to tell or a point to make.
4. **Filtering**-When you filter you listen to some things and not to others. You pay only enough attention to see if somebody's angry or unhappy, or if you're in emotional danger. Once assured that the communication contains none of those things, then you let your mind wander. Another way people filter is simply to avoid hearing certain things-anything threatening, negative, critical, or unpleasant.
5. **Judging**-Negative labels have enormous power. If you prejudge someone as unqualified, you don't pay as much attention to what they say. Hastily judging a statement as immoral, hypercritical, or irrational means you've ceased to listen, and you've begun to make a "knee jerk" reaction.
6. **Dreaming**-You're half listening and something the person says suddenly triggers a chain of private associations
7. **Identifying**-In this barrier, you take everything a person tells you and refer it back to your own personal experience. Everything you hear reminds you of something you've felt, done, or suffered. You're so busy with those exciting tales of your life that there's not time to really hear the other person.
8. **Advising**-You're the great problem-solver, ready with help and suggestions. You don't have to hear more than a few sentences before you begin searching for the right answer. However, while you're cooking up suggestions and convincing someone to "just try it," you may miss what's most important. If you didn't hear the feelings and you don't acknowledge the person's pain, he or she still feels basically alone.
9. **Sparring**-this barrier has you arguing and debating because you're so quick to disagree. In fact, a lot of your focus is on finding things with which to disagree. You take strong stands on just about everything. One sub-type of sparring is discounting. The way to avoid sparring is to repeat what you've heard.
10. **Being Right**-Being right means you will go to any length-twist the facts, rationalize, make up excuses or accusations, call up past sins-to avoid being wrong. You can't listen to criticism, you can't be corrected, and you can't take suggestions to change.
11. **Derailing**-This listening barrier is accomplished by suddenly changing the subject. You derail the train of conversation when you get bored or uncomfortable with it. Another way of derailing is by joking; this means that you continually respond to whatever is said with a joke or quip in order to avoid the discomfort and anxiety in seriously listening to the other person.
12. **Placating**- "Right...right...absolutely...I know...of course you are..." You really want to be nice, pleasant and supportive. You want people to like you, so you agree with everything. Another for is you may half-listen, just enough to get the drift but you're not involved. You are placating rather than tuning in and examining what's being said.