

ACTIVE LISTENING TECHNIQUES

Body Language

These are non-verbal behaviors that help others know you're listening, and help you focus in. Eye-contact, facing the person speaking, an open body stance, nodding, smiling, and putting away phones or other distractions sends the message that you are paying attention and helps you to be an active listener.

Small Encouragements

These are sounds made to let a person know the other is there and listening. Such as, "Oh?", "When?", and "Really?", "Mmmm". They are questions, comments, or sounds that do not interfere with the flow of conversation but do let others know that you are there and listening. These small encouragements help build trust and encourage others to continue talking.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a summary in your own words of what you were told. This demonstrates listening and helps create empathy because it is evident that you have heard and are trying to understand. Paraphrasing clarifies information, highlights important topics, and promotes give and take between you and the speaker. Plus, it helps make you a better listener!

Usually, paraphrasing begins with the words, "Are you telling me..." or "Are you saying..."

Emotion Labeling

This is often the first active listening skill to be used. It is important to tune in to the emotion behind the words and facts. It is a common mistake to get into problem-solving too early. By problem-solving too early, you have likely not listened enough to get all of the information you need, and the other person is often not ready to solve the problem yet. It's ok to make a mistake in labeling emotions. The other person will correct you and will often be grateful for the attempt to understand them.

Common phrases for you to use are, "Are you feeling...", "You sound...", "You seem..." , "I hear...(emotion heard by you)". You do not tell people how they are feeling, but how they sound to you.

Mirroring (or Reflecting)

This is the technique of repeating the last word or phrase and putting a question mark after it. This provides very exact responses because you are using the other person's own words. Reflecting or mirroring allows you to ask the speaker for more information without you guiding the direction of the other person's thoughts. It can get information when you do not have enough to ask a good question. It is useful when you are at a loss for words and it provides an opportunity for the subject to think about what they have said.

Open-Ended Questions

The primary use of open-ended questions is to help a subject start talking. Asking open-ended questions encourages the person to say more. They are questions that cannot be answered with a single word such as "yes" or "no". Open-ended questions usually begin with *how*, *what*, *when* and *where*. Note that "why" questions are not asked directly. "Why" questions tend to steer the conversation toward blame and shut down communication. "Why" questions also tend to pass judgment. Closed-end questions give a feeling of interrogation that makes trust building difficult.

Silence

This begins with waiting until the speaker has completely finished talking, and then pausing. Often people need time to keep thinking to sort out their thoughts. Silence can be very effective on a number of levels. Most people are not comfortable with silence and will fill it with talk. It is to your advantage to keep others talking. Silence can also be used to emphasize a point. You can use silence just before or just after saying something important.

Adapted from On-Scene Guide for Crisis Negotiators, Frederick J. Lanceley, Boca Raton, CRC Press, 1999, pp 20-24.

