

Listening is the most fundamental component of interpersonal communication skills.

Listening is not something that just happens (that is hearing), listening is an active process in which a conscious decision is made to listen to and understand the messages of the speaker.

Listeners should remain neutral and non-judgmental, this means trying not to take sides or form opinions, especially early in the conversation. Active listening is also about patience - pauses and short periods of silence should be accepted.

Listeners should not be tempted to jump in with questions or comments every time there are a few seconds of silence. Active

listening involves giving the other person time to explore their thoughts and feelings, they should, therefore, be given adequate time for that.

Active listening not only means focusing fully on the speaker but also actively showing verbal and non-verbal signs of listening.

Generally speakers want listeners to demonstrate '*active listening*' by responding appropriately to what they are saying. Appropriate responses to listening can be both verbal and non-verbal, examples of which are listed below:

Signs of Active Listening

Non-Verbal Signs of Attentive or Active Listening

This is a generic list of non-verbal signs of listening, in other words people who are listening are more likely to display at least some of these signs. However these signs may not be appropriate in all situations and across all cultures.

Smile

Small smiles can be used to show that the listener is paying attention to what is being said or as a way of agreeing or being happy about the messages being received. Combined with nods of the head, smiles can be powerful in affirming that messages are being listened to and understood.



Eye Contact

It is normal and usually encouraging for the listener to look at the speaker. Eye contact can however be intimidating, especially for more shy speakers – gauge how much eye contact is appropriate for any given situation. Combine eye contact with smiles and other non-verbal messages to encourage the speaker.

Posture

Posture can tell a lot about the sender and receiver in interpersonal interactions. The attentive listener tends to lean slightly forward or sideways whilst sitting. Other signs of active listening may include a slight slant of the head or resting the head on one hand.

Mirroring

Automatic reflection/mirroring of any facial expressions used by the speaker can be a sign of attentive listening. These reflective expressions can help to show sympathy and empathy in more emotional situations. Attempting to consciously mimic facial expressions (i.e. not automatic reflection of expressions) can be a sign of inattention.

Distraction

The active listener will not be distracted and therefore will refrain from fidgeting, looking at a clock or watch, doodling, playing with their hair or picking their fingernails.