



What actually is ‘active listening’ and how do you do it?

You may have heard people use the term ‘active listening’. It’s a powerful skill that can help someone who’s struggling to cope, to feel heard and better understood. Given how beneficial it is, our mental health experts have explained what exactly active listening is, and have shared tips to help us all improve our active listening skills.

What is active listening?

Active listening is a communication skill that goes beyond hearing the words that someone says. It is listening to understand, rather than listening to respond. It can help to eliminate misunderstanding and can build a stronger alliance between speaker and listener.

Active listening involves preparing to listen, observing what verbal and non-verbal messages are being sent, and providing appropriate feedback to show the listener is being attentive to the message. The listener is more of a sounding board rather than someone who’s there to provide their own opinion on a topic.



Five active listening techniques

1. Summarising and reflecting back to the speaker

Summarising is a key skill used within therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This technique shows that the listener has understood what the speaker is saying, allows a space for the speaker to clarify anything, and helps the speaker to feel understood. After the speaker has spoken, the listener should summarise and paraphrase what they have heard.

2. Practising good eye contact

Eye contact is relatively simple and yet can make the world of difference to active listening. It helps the listener to stay grounded and present in the conversation and reduces the chances of distraction. However, there is always a balance, where the listener should not overcompensate with their eye contact – you don't want to make the conversation feel uncomfortable.

3. Being non-judgemental

By remaining neutral, the listener is helping the speaker to feel comfortable and confident, which will enable them to share their true thoughts and feelings. Being nonjudgmental creates a safe space where there is no fear of being criticised or blamed. It is also important to be patient and not fill quiet spaces or silences.

4. Noticing and using verbal and nonverbal communication skills

The vast majority of our communication skills are non-verbal, so paying attention to the speaker's non-verbal cues are just as important as listening to their verbal cues. Equally, the listener must be aware of their own non-verbal cues – lean into the conversation, nod at key points and maintain eye contact. Concentrate on both your own, and their, facial expressions.

5. Asking open-ended questions to help further the conversation

Open-ended questions demonstrate a genuine curiosity about the speaker, which can help them feel more valued. Open-ended questions you could ask include, "Can you tell me more about that?", "How did that make you feel?", and "What do you think could be the best path for you moving forwards?".



How to improve your active listening skills

Getting into the habit of active listening can improve many key areas of your life, including your personal and professional relationships. Active listening can also increase your knowledge of different people and different cultures, and can help to increase and improve collaboration.

Here are four things you could try to improve your active listening skills:

- Encourage your own curiosity – ask questions and seek to understand the people and situations around you.
- When getting to know someone, find common ground to talk about – if you're already interested in a topic it is easier to stay focused on it
- Practice – as with any skill, it takes practice to improve on. The more you practise, the better you can become. Equally, the more you demonstrate the skill of actively listening, the more other people learn about it. They may even start to practise it themselves.
- Learn when the conversation needs to be closed in a respectful way – this can help you to prevent the conversation turning into a negative.

