

# Applying It: Using Reflective Skills to Improve Listening in Relationship-based Work

Center for Early Education  
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

*This tip sheet offers prompts and techniques for reflective listening in support of building trust in meaningful relationships*

## RECALL IT

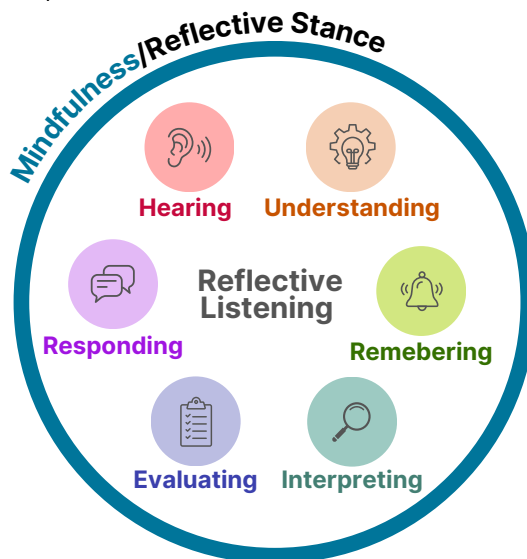
The **Introducing It** tip sheet presents the idea that when we integrate reflective practices into active listening, we become reflective listeners. Jeree Pawl stated that “How you are is as important as what you do.” Bringing reflective practice attributes to listening takes intent, time, and practice.

Reflective practice (Watson et al., 2022) asks us to be:

- **non-judgmental** about the feelings and thoughts of both the speaker and listener
- **comfortable with discomfort** of not knowing what is being said/felt
- **curious** about our own and others' perspectives and experience
- **empathetic** to others' experience and their feelings
- **motivated to assume best intent**
- **open to new learning** about ourselves, others, and the relationship
- **trustworthy**, in that our actions align with our stated values and intentions
- **committed to the relationship**, demonstrated by our responses and actions

Active listening is made up of Hearing, Understanding, Remembering, Interpreting, Evaluation, and Responding (Brownell, 2016). We integrate reflective attributes into each element to move it into reflective listening. We are able to focus on the speaker and relationship when we employ mindfulness as a frame.

Mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmental” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness brings together an awareness of mind and body, and brings attention to the immediate present.



## MINDFULNESS IN PRACTICE

The demands of our work compete and clamor for attention, compromising our ability to remain focused when preparing to listen. Using reflective listening requires that we step into "holding a reflective stance," meaning we intentionally use reflective attributes. Mindfulness frames this stance and provides the space needed to effectively retrieve and use our reflective skills.

Entering into a mindful state takes practice. Try these two exercises to build your ability:

**TIP:** Pick one specific activity you do routinely, such as walking through a doorway, or starting your car. Use this routine as a reminder to practice mindfulness by focusing on what is happening internally during that moment. Take a minute to focus on the thoughts you hold and the physical sensations within your body while doing this routine. This helps condition you to become present to a single moment.

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**TIP:** Breathing is a simple path to centering your body and mind. Find a comfortable position to sit or stand. Focus your attention on inhaling air through the nose and the path it takes into your lungs. Notice your lungs expanding. Briefly pause at the height of intake, and exhale through your mouth. Notice and release tension held in other parts of your body as you release breath. Repeat a few times, focusing on the sensation of your breathing's natural rhythm. Thoughts may claim your attention while breathing. Acknowledge and release them, returning your focus to breathing. Pay attention to the body and mind sensations of being in the present moment. With practice, your brain can return to this state more easily.

**What barriers do you encounter in practicing mindfulness?  
Why might this be?**

*Keep the responses to your reflection in mind, and use them the next time in order to overcome these challenges.*

## HOLDING A REFLECTIVE STANCE IN LISTENING

The conversation we have with ourselves is as important as the conversation we are having with another person. The following reflective prompts are offered as "guide rails." Use them during conversation to help you transform active listening into reflective listening.

Conversations that benefit from intentional mindfulness ask for considered answers to these questions before you begin the conversation.

**What are your goals, or what do you hope to gain from this conversation?**

**To what degree are you prepared to make equal room for your goals and the speaker's?**

*Think about the role that brings you to this conversation.*

**How might your thinking about this role – the values and beliefs you assign it – help or hinder how you participate in it?**

**Might any of your values or beliefs create potential barriers?**

**How might you reconsider and reframe potentially challenging beliefs and values?**

**What might you do to help yourself both listen to your internal responses as well as the speaker during the conversation?**

**HEARING:** pay attention to everything your hearing is taking in, including sounds other than the words being spoken.

**How are ambient sounds – or other physical sensations – impacting your ability to pay attention?**

**Might there be things you can do to make it easier to hear and to pay attention?**

**UNDERSTANDING:** listen with your ears *and* eyes – look to understand both the words used as well as the speaker’s nonverbal communication cues. Let the speaker know what you believe you heard.

***Consider the emotional cues are you being given.***

**How well do they “match” with what you understand the words to mean?**

**How might you communicate you have heard the emotional message as well as the spoken message?**

**TIP:** Asking clarifying, open-ended questions incorporates reflective skills. Open-ended questions often begin with “How” or “What.”

Practice by changing these yes/no questions into open-ended versions that encourage more from the speaker:

1. Were you disappointed when you didn’t get the promotion?
2. Was the baby happy at the new child care?
3. Did you feel stressed when your co-teacher was gone for the week?

**TIP:** Paraphrasing followed by curiosity and wondering questions is another way to encourage more from the speaker, making room for emotions and encouraging further reflection. The following are a few examples.

1. The promotion went to your colleague. I wonder - what did that bring up for you?
2. You said Baby was crying a lot when Mom picked her up at the new child care. I wonder how it felt for Baby to be in an unknown place without any familiar adults?
3. You lost a big support system when your co-teacher was out. I’m curious to know - what did you experience while managing the class by yourself?

**REMEMBERING:** put important parts of or the entire message into immediate, short-term or long-term memory, based on its content.

In reflective practice, we pay close attention to feelings/emotions: those clearly communicated through verbal and nonverbal channels; feelings/emotions made known nonverbally yet not clearly articulated; and the feeling/emotions physically sensed, but not yet identified.

**What emotions are you able to identify in the speaker as you listen?**

**Why is this important to your relationship and to the goal of the conversation?**

**What do you want to remember about these insights?**

**What emotions are you able to identify in yourself as you listen?**

**Why is this important to your relationship and to the goal of the conversation?**

**What do you want to remember about these insights?**

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**INTERPRETING AND EVALUATING:** Active interpreting captures and compares our self-talk to the message's meaning as we understand it. We register how open we are to the message. We then evaluate the degree to which we accept the message. This is often where implicit biases and judgements show up.

**TIP:** Note any immediate reactions – thoughts or physical feelings – that come up for you. Step into them mindfully.  
**Why might you think or feel these reactions?**

Bring in curiosity:

- Wonder about the speaker's perspective and experience
- Wonder about the speaker's thoughts/feelings, given their perspective
- Evaluate the degree to which you are able to relinquish your viewpoint in favor of the speaker's

## What happens to your thinking?

**TIP:** Taking a pause to think about your reactions offers you the chance to turn them into empathetic and intentional responses. Ask for a pause in the exchange if you need it!

**RESPONDING:** show the speaker they have been heard, seen, and understood.

**To what degree are you able to bring congruency between your words and nonverbal cues?**

**To what degree are you able to hold the speaker's perspective and experience in mind as you respond?**

**To what degree are your identified barriers interfering with the ability to respond with mindfulness, intention, and empathy?**

## DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic,

Please visit CEED's website:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

Check out the online self-study modules:

Wondering with a Purpose ([z.umn.edu/wondering](https://z.umn.edu/wondering))

Tackling the Elephants in the Room

Part 1 ([z.umn.edu/elephants1](https://z.umn.edu/elephants1))

Part 2 ([z.umn.edu/elephants2](https://z.umn.edu/elephants2))

Check out the courses on the RIOS™:

RIOS™ 1 ([z.umn.edu/rios1](https://z.umn.edu/rios1))

RIOS™ 2 ([z.umn.edu/rios2](https://z.umn.edu/rios2))

## REFERENCES

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