

# Introducing It: Supporting Relationship-based Work through Reflective Listening

Center for Early Education  
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

*This tip sheet presents the components of active listening, introduces elements of reflective practice that transform it into reflective listening, and potential barriers.*

Relationship-based work seeks to continuously deepen trust and connections with others. Whether with professional colleagues, the people we manage, mentor, or coach, the families/caregivers we serve, or those we know personally, relationships thrive when we incorporate a variety of communication skills, including the skill of listening.

Listening is often difficult to do well. External and internal messages and stimuli challenge us to remain present and focused on the speaker and the relationship. When reflective attributes are brought into listening, we become better able to not only understand the speaker, but ourselves as well. Reflective listening offers a direct pathway in helping to build meaningful relationships.

## WHAT IS "ACTIVE LISTENING"?

Active listening is defined as the practice of "preparing to listen, observing what verbal and non-verbal messages are being sent, and then providing appropriate feedback for the sake of showing attentiveness to and understanding of the message sent" (*Communication in the Real World*, 2016). Active listening involves Hearing, Understanding, Remembering, Interpreting, Evaluating, and Responding (HURIER acronym; Brownell, 2016). There is interplay among these components during active listening.

**HEARING** is the act of taking in sound and making meaning of the sound(s). In active hearing, we pay attention to the speaker's words to capture their meaning.

**UNDERSTANDING** expands upon active hearing. We assess how well we understand the meaning of the speaker's words and nonverbal cues. Nonverbal cues include vocal characteristics, such as volume and emphasis. In nonverbal communication, our eyes also "hear." We attend to the meaning behind the speaker's posture, gestures, and facial expressions.

We use our knowledge of the speaker and the situation itself. We think about what has been said, consider the intent of the message, and then paraphrase back to the speaker what we believe we heard. We clarify when necessary. Our own nonverbal cues such as vocal elements, head nods, eye contact, gestures and body orientation further communicates active understanding.

**REMEMBERING** requires listening for key points or ideas. We decide upon their importance to us and the speaker. We commit these points to immediate, short-term or long-term memory when actively remembering.

**INTERPRETING** combines the speaker's message - its intent and context - nonverbal cues, and our personal knowledge of the speaker, to look at the sum total as it relates to ourselves. We examine our understanding, feelings, perspectives, and consider how receptive we are to the information. Active interpreting captures how we feel and self-talk in relation to the message.

**EVALUATING** brings critical thinking to listening. We consider the speaker's credibility, and look for indications of fact, opinion, and errors, while noticing our own self-talk.

**RESPONDING** signals to the speaker that their message has been heard. At this point the roles flip - we become the sender. We provide a response that signals: "I understand the message's meaning and context"; "I see your perspective and the feelings behind it"; "I have put aside my judgements"; and "I have considered my response or would like you to say more." Our words and nonverbal cues demonstrate an active response.

## REFLECTIVE LISTENING

Reflective listening intentionally integrates elements of reflective practice (Watson et al., 2022). We take a reflective stance by focusing on *being* rather than *doing*. "Being" transforms active listening into reflective listening by being:

- Mindful
- Non-judgmental
- Comfortable with discomfort
- Curious
- Empathetic
- Motivated to assume best intent
- Open to new learning
- Trustworthy
- Committed to the relationship

Reflective listening begins with *mindfulness*.

**Mindfulness** is "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmental." (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). It permits the listener to hold themselves and the speaker in sharper, careful focus. Mindfulness settles us. It opens space to acknowledge and register judgmental or biased thoughts and feelings – and to let them go.

Mindfulness is the catalyst for holding a reflective stance while listening. It also honors silence's place in the communication cycle. It is not unusual for silence to create discomfort for many. Long silences may be seen as communicating inattention, absence, or disapproval. However, reflective listening cherishes the dynamic that silence brings to the communication process.

Reflective listeners use silence to create space. Space offers us time to process, to give rise to insights, to acknowledge and hold thoughts and emotions that surface, and to be intentional about responses. In the presence of strong emotions, reflective silence signals safety and acceptance. It communicates recognition and affirmation of both the speaker's feelings and the message's weight.

**Curiosity** flourishes in the presence of being mindfully present. Curiosity opens the listener up to wondering about the speaker – their particular words, the emotions behind them, to nonverbal cues, and to the speaker's perspective and experiences. The wondering that comes from curiosity focuses us on the speaker rather than ourselves. Purposeful wondering sets aside bias and judgement in favor of empathy.

**Empathy**, or understanding and feeling the thoughts and emotions of another, is critical to reflective listening. Reflective listeners experience in parallel fashion what the speaker experiences when sharing their thoughts and feelings. Empathy guides and tempers our response. We discover new and often powerful learning. Considering others' perspectives with empathy offers reflective listeners a powerful lever that encourages new learning for themselves and the speaker. This shared discovery forges a stronger relationship and deeper trust in it.

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## BARRIERS TO REFLECTIVE LISTENING

Learning to listen reflectively requires intention and practice. We may find it more difficult to listen reflectively when we encounter:

**External or Internal noise:** Distractions can range from our devices and noisy rooms to holding on to our own mental checklists, opinions, and concerns. These distractions can muscle their way to the forefront, compromising our ability to fully attend to the speaker.

**Mind set:** Coming to a conversation while clinging to your perceived role (supervisor, coach, expert, etc.) can prevent us from hearing the full meaning of a message. Our listening shifts to evaluating, judging, assuming, or defending against what is being said.

**Self-interest:** Interrupting the speaker, dominating the conversation, and thinking about what to say next all divert focus from the speaker.

**Implicit biases:** Perhaps the most difficult barrier to recognize, the unconscious prejudices, judgements, values, and feelings we hold onto color the ways in which we listen and understand the message.

Reflective listening builds upon active listening through taking a reflective stance.

Jeree Pawl, one of the pioneers of infant mental health and reflective practice, stated:

*“How you are is as important as what you do.”*

Being is an action in itself. Incorporating everything this action implies into our listening offers opportunities for personal growth, stronger connection, and deeper trust within relationships.

## 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](http://z.umn.edu/wondering))

Tackling the Elephants in the Room

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

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

## REFERENCES

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