

Improve Your Relationships by Learning to Listen By Dr. Laura Fadell

Are you a good listener, or simply waiting to talk? If asked, most people would say they're good listeners. Like the time their spouse came home telling them about an upsetting incident at work, or when their child shared a story about the class hamster, or even when a good friend went through a major crisis. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is, because listening is a skill that needs to be learned and practiced, many people only *think* they're good listeners. As a practicing relationship therapist, the majority of couples who find themselves in my office are couples with poor communication skills. After all, listening is one half of all communication! And... the simple art of listening isn't always so simple.

So what exactly does it mean to 'listen'? According to Michael Nichols, PhD, "To listen is to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved by, and appreciate" the message another individual is trying to communicate. Hearing the words and having an intellectual understanding of what is being said is indeed necessary but certainly not sufficient. Also needed is the capacity to actually *feel* what is being said – this is what it means to empathize. Empathic listening is often misunderstood, but with good intention. It is not giving advice or providing reassurance, and it is not sympathy. Empathic listening is getting in touch with and appreciating the feelings behind another's words and then conveying this understanding and appreciation back to the speaker.

Why is listening so important? Because it *hurts* not to be listened to! Listening bridges the gap between individuals, and allows you to truly be with the other person. For example, when we talk about how distressed or bummed out we are, we really don't want to be told that things will get better. We want to be *known*. In order to be a good listener it is imperative that you let go of what's on your mind long enough to hear what's on the other person's. Remember, listening is an art and an active process that requires us to suspend our own needs and reactions for a period of time. Suppressing our own urge to talk is much harder than it seems. This is why so many couples benefit from learning how to use reflective listening skills to communicate with their partner. For example, how many times has someone told you about an experience they had and your immediate response was "That reminds me of the time when..." (translation: "I can top that") or "If I were you I would..." (translation: "Stop complaining and *do* something about it!") Learning how to reflect back what your partner is trying to tell you will make major improvements in your communication and in your relationship. According to John Gottman, a marital therapy researcher for over 25 years, most problematic issues in marriages (69%) don't get *solved* they get *managed*. If you find yourself needing help to make these changes, find a professional who can help you get on the right path to truly listening and effectively communicating with your partner.

Quick Tips for Better Listening:

- Wipe your mind clear of everything except what your partner is telling you

- Avoid becoming distracted
- Ask a follow-up question about what your partner just told you *before* adding any of your own comments into the conversation
- Paraphrase back to your partner what you think you heard them say to give them an opportunity to clarify whether you heard them correctly
- Never begin speaking until your partner has completely finished what they are saying – in fact a good rule of thumb is to think about what they have said for *at least 5-7* seconds before saying anything at all!