

Easy listening

Effective communication is essential at home, at work and in the classroom. Poor communication habits short-change both listener and speaker. But while teaching people how to communicate has often focused on effective speaking, teaching how to listen effectively is just as crucial.

Effective listening allows speakers and listeners to share perceptions, expectations and information and to catch otherwise missed details. It meets a person's need for recognition and strengthens the possibility that ideas will be heard.

Research indicates that business managers spend the majority of their work day listening. Parents should listen to their children carefully. Teachers who listen effectively to their students motivate their class to participate in learning.

Listening and communication, however, can sometimes be distorted by the listeners' attitudes, judgments, preoccupation and level of interest in the subject. This distortion can increase if the listener has a special interest or preconception about the subject or speaker. To avoid distortion, an effort must be made to listen well.

Good listening must be learned – it takes practice to do it well. The best and easiest way to listen is to "listen actively." Use your own words to paraphrase the speaker's comments – they can verify or clarify the message and intent. State your response only after the speaker verifies the feedback.

Active listening requires that you listen intently and understand both the speaker's message and point of view. Don't let your attention wander, and don't make snap judgments. This helps to avoid misunderstandings because you restate the speaker's words and feelings and clarify intent.

Some tips for communication and listening

- **Give your undivided attention.** When someone wants to talk, don't read, watch TV, fall asleep or make yourself busy with something else.
- **Maintain eye contact.** Look at the person when you're listening. Good eye contact helps build mutual understanding.

- **Encourage.** Use neutral words to show interest and prompt the speaker to continue talking. Don't agree or disagree. Listen without making judgments – pay attention to the content of the message, its central themes and ideas, and don't prejudice based on the way a person speaks or dresses, for instance.
- **Clarify.** Ask questions to get information you need to understand what is being said.
- **Listen to the meaning** – it's more important than jargon. Speakers can alienate some listeners by using technical jargon or emotionally laden words that provoke strong responses.
- **Restate.** Repeat in your own words the main thoughts and ideas the speaker has expressed. This shows that you've heard and understand what is being said. Then you can respond with your own ideas.
- **Reflect.** Show that you understand the feelings behind what is being expressed. This can help the speaker clarify what he or she is feeling. It acknowledges the feelings being expressed.
- **Listen between the lines for feelings beneath the surface.** Don't assume you know how the speaker feels. If you're not sure, ask.
- **Summarize.** Pull all the facts and feelings together. This reassures the speaker that he or she has given you the whole picture.
- **Validate.** Acknowledge that the speaker's efforts and feelings are valuable.
- **Pay attention to voice inflection and body language.** Less than 10 percent of communication is accomplished through words.

If you need help

Good communication is the foundation of strong relationships. If you need further help, call GHS' Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740 or toll free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is always available. ©

www.genhs.org

