

# The Art of Listening: How Open Are Your Ears?

*5 good and 3 bad listening habits that help or hinder relationships.*

Adapted from:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/resolution-not-conflict/201111/the-art-listening-how-open-are-your-ears>

Listening, which is one half of the art of conversation, is an act of connection. Even if you can't touch or see someone, you feel connected if you hear their voice. Listening enhances the health of your marriage and other close relationships. Listening to yourself enables you to live with more well-being, especially if you combine listening to yourself with listening to others. Listening to your body keeps you physically healthy. And between a couple, listening is an act of love.

Eating lunch today where I work I was struck by the broad range in quality of the listening skills of the various professionals who were eating there.

Some folks in our dining room are consistently fun to talk with. They are the great listeners. Other folks are consistently unpleasant to interact with. They appear to have stoppered up ears, showing little interest in what others say. Or they respond only by saying what they disagree with, making them quite disagreeable. Ignoring what others say, dismissing it, disinterest and disagreeing suck the energy out of conversations.

Here's five effective listening habits and then three problematic listening patterns.

Truly great listeners do all five of the good and virtually none of the three problematic listening styles. They use the skills for listening to others, for listening to their own thoughts and concerns, and for listening with attunement to their bodies.

1. Hungry listening: A hungry listener has a real appetite for learning others' perspectives. Their responses convey interest in what you say, encouraging you to say more.

By contrast, some folks are anorectic when it comes to listening. They have little interest in others' worlds. It's not much fun to talk with them, even if they have lots to say.

2. Hunting: Exploring with open-ended *how* and *what* questions, a good hunter has a knack for asking the kinds of conversation-starter and follow-up questions that build fascinating conversations.

3. Gathering: Thinking out loud about what you have heard enables you to be nourished by new data, new thoughts, new insights and understandings. It enables you to register new data by attaching it to formerly held ideas, creating a new file, or in some other way registering more and more information in your mental data base.

At the same time, chewing aloud to digest data you have taken in indicates to your conversation partner that you care about what you have heard. It lets them know what you took in. As you chew aloud on what you have heard, expanding on this information by adding your thoughts about it, you've got the makings of being a great conversational partner.

4. Clarifying: Misunderstandings often occur in dialogue about important issues. Asking open-ended questions, that is, questions that begin with *How..?* or *What...?*, requests further information when anything sounds at all unclear.

Information is power. Misunderstandings are powerful sources of upsets.

Listening to your body especially requires this kind of clarifying listening. When you feel a pain, notice a lump, or become aware of an unusual dark spot on your skin, do you look the other way or focus on the signal of a potential problem to find out what is going on?

Early detection is key to successful treatment of many physical illnesses. Does that pain in your chest reflect a potential heart problem? Does a lump or dark spot indicate a potential cancer threat? On the one hand, becoming frightened by your body's signals would be counter-productive. On the other hand, listening and clarifying your body's messages to you sustains physical health.

5. Porous Listening: Porousness refers to the extent to which there are openings in a membrane. Porousness in listening refers to the extent to which you are open to receiving new information. Porous listening includes hungry, hunting, gathering and clarifying listening. It signals someone open to deeper connections, intimacy, and capable of interesting conversations.

Now here come the three problematic listening habits:

1. Non-responsive listening: If you habitually close your mouth, that is, say nothing, in response to new data that people feed you, you will end up starved for personal connection as well as under-nourished in terms of new ideas.

Non-responsive listeners say nothing about what was just spoken to them. They may have listened or maybe not. There's just no way to tell.

Sometimes this silent-response listening mode indicates resistance to uptake of new data. In these cases it is the antithesis of the hungry, hunting, gathering and problem-solving porous listening characteristic of folks with whom people enjoy talking.

Some non-responsive listeners are in fact hearing what has been said to them. They just give no verbal or non-verbal indication. Commenting on what you heard, building on the thought you heard, or even just nodding your head up and down convey that listening has occurred. Non-responsive listening, because it gives no visible or audible sign of what has been done with

the data, tends to convey that no hearing occurred. That's a turn-off to the person who spoke. "Why bother saying more if I'm getting no response?"

2. Listening like a goalie: Here's-What's-Wrong-With-What-You-Said listening responses indicate that someone has been listening to knock away data rather than to take it in. Instead of listening to learn, this is listening to negate.

The tip-off is either the word *but*, which butts away what you said, or *not*, which replaces your point with the opposite. Here's some examples: "It's nice outside." "No it's not; it's too hot." or "Yes, it is sunny, *but* it's too hot."

Listening to negate makes every conversation an exercise in "I'm right; you're wrong." It's also frustrating for the speaker because data rarely enters the listener's data base.

3. Rebound listening: Whatever you say, a rebound listener grabs the spotlight, bringing the conversation back to him/herself. What you say just invites this person to talk about himself.

If you mention that one of your children has been ill, the response might be, "I was sick yesterday too." This kind of response could be fine if it's followed up with "What are your child's symptoms?" That would return the topic to the one on the mind of the speaker. That's fine.

The problem comes when every conversation ends up being *all about me*. Beware. That's a listening habit that suggests narcissism.

What's so important about listening skills?

When people talk about having a "great relationship," they in large part are referring to how openly they listen to each other, plus how much positive feedback they give each other. That's true when the relationship is with others and equally true with regard to your relationship with your own thoughts and with your body.

A huge part of feeling connected with someone entails feeling that when you speak, the other person cares about what you think. Feeling heard is feeling valued.

Because such a big indicator of loving is listening.