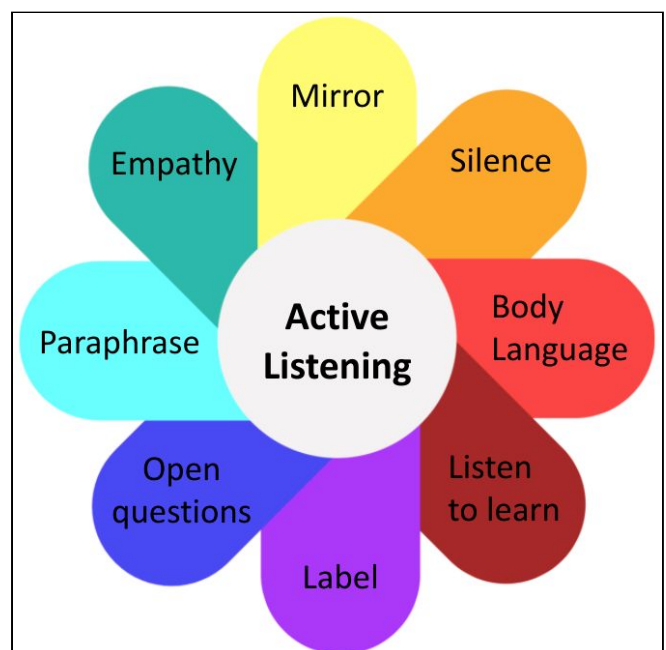


Active Listening Handbook

The purpose of this handbook is to give an introduction and overview of the important concepts, benefits and skills to active listening. For further study please review the book list at the end of this handbook.

“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.” - Dalai Lama

Listening is one of the biggest and most effective skills in our repertoire and one that plays a vital role in both our personal and professional lives. Yet it is underestimated by many. Who out of us are able to say that they listen well? In psychotherapy ‘active listening’ is a concept that has been around for decades and is used in every therapeutic partnership. Numerous studies show the positive effects of active listening and has led the world of business to incorporate these learnings into their most critical processes. It has become the common thread through negotiation, personal effectiveness, business development and problem solving as a prerequisite for success.



● Benefits to Active Listening

- **Connect:** People are more open to the ideas of others when they feel connected.
- **Create deep and meaningful relationships:** Relationships are what keep us mentally healthy and provide us with a higher quality of life and longer life expectancy. Likewise in business, it is not necessarily “*what you know but who you know*” that can influence your success.
- **Establish trust and rapport:** Without trust agreements are often impossible to reach and hold little weight. Relationships cannot be developed and our ability to achieve is diminished without trust. When people feel safe and secure they are more willing to contribute, problem solve and resolve conflict.

“[intentional listening] is one of the highest compliments we can pay anyone”
(Carnegie)

- **Respect:** By giving our undivided attention, actively listening demonstrates that we value what others have to say and that their opinions and values matter to us. The rule of reciprocity will also come into play here; by showing respect we will gain respect. And it is not just the speaker whose respect you will gain; respecting others shows personal integrity to those around us.
- **Learn more about others:** “*Seek first to understand*” (Covey).
When a person feels listened to, they feel understood, appreciated and respected. When they feel understood they are more open to share not only the “what” but the “why” behind their positions.
“*Knowing the why behind their positions is the key to moving toward an agreement.*” (Voss)
- **Be listened to:** Once we’ve given our time and attention to listen to another person they are far more likely to reciprocate and to openly listen to us. When we have shown our respect to others they will be obliged to listen to us in return.
- **Avoid conflict and misunderstandings:** Sometimes it is enough for someone to feel heard and accepted.
“*The chronic kicker, even the most violent critic, will frequently soften and be subdued in the presence of a patient, sympathetic listener*” Carnegie.
NB: in contrast to Carnegie we use empathy rather than sympathy. Empathy shows understanding and acceptance; sympathy offers pity.
- **Increase your ability to negotiate:** When you actively listen you find that people open up more about what is driving them. This allows you to know what is important for the negotiation and what is not.
- **Improve your ability to influence, persuade, lead:** To influence, persuade, lead, you first need to understand the people involved. When we know what is important to others, their values and fears, we are able to grasp what motivates and drives the other. When someone feels accepted they feel safe, trusting and more willing to be moved by another.

● Skills of Active Listening

- **Listen to understand not to respond:** Most people spend more time thinking about their response than they do listening. This means the more intricate messages can go unnoticed and with that opportunities to explore underlying issues are missed.
- **Mirror/Reflect:** Pick up a few words to simply repeat back. It shows you are paying attention. The power of hearing one's own words said by another can allow the speaker to gain insight into what they are saying. It also helps you to remember more.
Mirror language occasionally throughout the conversation, it will come naturally to most. Don't go over the top or you'll appear disingenuous.
- **Paraphrase:** Different to mirroring, paraphrasing is not so much aiming to open the conversation with new insights but to confirm understanding and demonstrate full attention. Summing up in a few short words what they have said will show that you're listening and allow you to check your understanding.
Do this at the end of key points the speaker makes.
- **Label:** If you get a sense of an underlying emotion or perspective from the speaker that they are not expressing, put it out there.
Use language "it seems", "it feels like" using a neutral tone to sound understanding and non-accusatory. It conveys acceptance of the speaker's feelings and opinions.
Labelling creates the opportunity to connect with the speaker to a feeling they may be unaware of and get fears into the open. Their answer will lead to insights and revelations that you have become privy to.
- **Use silence:** For many silence is an awkward space that needs to be filled. Use this to your advantage. Don't fill it, allow the other side to. It will provide them time to think more deeply about what they have said, to reflect, gain insight, make connections and link ideas. To fill the space they most likely feel compelled to share these insights with you.
Especially use after mirroring, labelling and paraphrasing.
- **Ask open ended questions to clarify and probe:** Closed questions lead to 'yes' or 'no' answers. They can stop conversations moving deeper and you from learning more from the speaker. By using open ended questions the speaker has to think more about the answer and the explanation they give.
Example: "*How do you see your future?*"
- **Hearing what's behind the words:** Sometimes it's not what people say but what they don't say that is important. Use labeling, open ended questions

and paraphrasing to help guide them towards the underlying meaning or problem.

- **Body language:** Open, inviting body language helps others relax. Leaning in slightly will show interest. Be mindful not to impose on their space as this will lead them to feel protective and defensive. Gentle eye contact, hand movements will allow them to feel non threatened. Nodding shows agreement, small sounds show you are following the conversation. Beware; fidgeting, big hand gestures, glancing at your watch or phone are often interpreted as disinterest. They should be avoided!
Notice if their body language correlates to what they are saying. Label or ask open ended questions to gently probe. When people are comfortable in a conversation they will often mirror the body language and gestures of the other.
- **Avoid interrupting:** It stops people's line of thought. You could miss the real answer. It shows a lack of respect for what the other has to say. Listen to understand, not to respond.
- **Avoid judgment:** No one likes being judged. You are welcome to your opinion but offering it in the form of a judgment is not going to help you progress the conversation. The conversation will only become defensive and you risk appearing aggressive.
Criticism of course is still important in every meaningful and productive relationship and can be achieved in the form of neutral and genuinely inquisitive open questions.
- **Avoid advice giving:** People want to be their own masters. They will respect and appreciate you more if you are the one that has given them the opportunity to find their own answers.
Consider using open, thought out questions to help guide them to your answer.

● **Book List for further study**

- *The Skilled Helper*; Gerard Egan
- *Counselling Skills and Theory*; Margaret Hough
- *Influence, The Psychology of Persuasion*; Robert B. Cialdini; P17-56
- *How to Win Friends and Influence People*; Dale Carnegie; P133-144
- *Never Split the Difference*; Chris Voss
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*; Stephen R. Covey; P236-260