

The Art of Listening

By John W. Nichols



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One frustration we often express to the other party in our relationships is, "You don't listen!" Words are exchanged, sound waves connect with ear drums, but communication does not happen. Do we absentmindedly tune-out our spouses, or is the failure to listen a symptom of something deeper? Can we learn to become better listeners?

My wife was delighted that I was scheduled to attend a corporate effective listening seminar in an initiative to enhance verbal interactions both internally with coworkers and externally with customers. I took notes, completed the homework assignments, and applied myself to learn all I could. My efforts were rewarded as I aced the final exam. Three weeks later in a heated discussion my wife threatened to call my boss to request that he send me back for a refresher. In her analysis

of our conflict, I was not listening.

A marriage is made up of two people with two personalities and often widely-varying perspectives. The chances of agreeing 100% of the time on every issue is virtually zero. Resolution comes as we share our viewpoints and discuss our differences. Remove listening from the process, though, and we have two people sprinkling words on the floor

Hearing and listening are not the same. Hearing is passive while listening requires action as I discipline my mind to connect with the speaker and receive the message she desires to send. Her words coupled with inflections and gestures will help me decode the meaning, if I pay attention. Here are some helpful tips on listening.

Set aside time for listening.

For discussions on big issues schedule an appointment on the family calendar. Ensure the event is assigned the appropriate importance, and select a suitable venue such as a quiet coffee shop, a serene walking trail, or a favorite bench in the park.

Remove distractions.

Switch off the TV, move away from the computer, and drop that smartphone. Reading a book, munching chips, and following a ballgame in the background guarantees I will miss much of my wife's message. By way of considerate preparation I might request a few minutes to finish the current task and clear my mind

Observe a verbal ceasefire.

Subjects about which we are passionate induce a desire to interrupt the speaker and interject a response. That eagerness usually forces listening to an abrupt halt. Wait. Allow your spouse to finish her thought. Analyze and consider her message before responding. Remember the Creator gave us two ears and

a single mouth, perhaps as a reminder to be "quick to hear and slow to speak" (James 2:19).

Avoid rabbit trails.

Determine to remain on topic rather than scurrying through a cornucopia of issues. Pause to review, and repeat her points to verify the communication link is functional. Ask clarifying questions if necessary.

Listen with your mind as you would read a book.

Speaking and listening are real-time activities and momentary lapses in listening cannot be recovered by flipping back a few pages to review. We must keep up. We can mentally underline or highlight those ideas the speaker emphasizes to retain our focus. Taking notes may be helpful.

Be a kind listener.

Kindness is demonstrated through action. Listening with kindness means I exercise care with the tone of my voice and employ caution in choosing words. I consider my spouse and how I may benefit her in our current exchange.

Listening is more than bobbing my head and uttering a passive, "uh-huh." With a little effort I can improve my skills, reduce communication errors, and strengthen my marriage.

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