



Listening

Listening, truly listening, is difficult. It requires a tremendous amount of effort, focus, and energy. In order to effectively listen you must hear what a person is saying, interpret their tone, body language and word choice. Once you have taken in this information, you must be careful to interpret the message based on what you know about the person. In addition, you interpret all you have taken in through your past experiences. Once your mind has done this, you have effectively heard the message. Or have you?

Listening to Others

How you listen to others depends on your relationship with them. You will be much more careful to hear what your colleagues and boss say versus what your significant other and children say. Often, depending on the relationship and the level of intimacy, we tend to assume much of what we hear. In other words, we take our past experiences with the person, our current situation, our current relationship with them and assume much of what the message is. When we do this, we truly do not hear what the other person is saying, rather we interpret and assume.

Interpreting Messages

In every conversation, there is a certain amount of interpretation needed, a certain amount of information which must be interpreted. For instance, if a person is visibly agitated, speaking quickly and using a tone which indicates a certain amount of energy, it is safe to assume the person is either angry, fearful, or both. Drawing on context clues and past experiences, you can safely guide the conversation to discover which of these two emotions is being expressed.

But what happens when you misinterpret a message? What happens when you identify anger and respond to anger when in truth the emotion is fear? What happens when you only half listen to someone and assume you know what the person is expressing? The fallout from misinterpretations is huge and can take quite a long time to repair. In some cases, when this happens enough, people assume you are not interested, and permanent damage is done to the relationship.

Lenses

We must first understand every message is filtered through a series of lenses. These lenses are composed of our past experiences, past traumas, our culture, our ethnicity and our current state. When we understand this, when we work to overcome these lenses, then and only then can we truly hear what the other person is saying.

One of the most effective ways to work through our lenses is to complete a daily diagnostic. In this diagnostic process we assess what our current needs are, what our current stressors are, where we are mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually, and what our mood is. If we can get into the habit of identifying what unmet needs we have, of what is bothering us and what is out of our control, we can clear away distractions and respond versus react.



What You Say

What you say is only a very small part of the conversation. Your tone of voice, body language and chosen words carry more influence than your actual words. Added in, is the challenge that people hear what they interpret and understand, not what is actually said. Much of any and every conversation is lost. At the end of the day it often does not matter what you said, rather what was heard.

Improving Listening

In order to move past hearing issues, there are a few steps we can implement. As we practice implementing the steps, as we perfect our listening skills those around us will take note and begin to work towards becoming better listeners as well.

Steps

1. Stop Talking
2. Prepare to Listen
3. Make the speaker feel comfortable
4. Remove any distractions
5. Show empathy
6. Be comfortable with silence
7. Set aside prejudices
8. Listen to the tone
9. Watch body language
10. Listen for the underlying message
11. Make sure the environment is conducive for a conversation

As you practice these skills, your listening will improve and with it, our empathy and emotional intelligence. Practice moving away from assumptions to what was actually said.

Be present. Stay Focused. Really Listen.