

ACTIVE LISTENING

When to do it:

Active listening is a strategy to be used reactively when a person is visibly upset; they may show a wide spectrum of behaviours from mild concern to extreme anger or frustration. However the principles of active listening can be applied at any time to allow for improved communication, and to reduce the likelihood of agitation developing into uncontained distress or conflict.

Active Listening: General Guidelines

1. Before speaking with the person, try to make your best guess about what emotion(s) they are feeling. If the person does not speak initially, you can begin by exploring this with them (“I’m trying to get a sense of how you’re feeling right now. You seem upset, am I right about that?”).
2. The person may initially use the fact that you are listening to ‘let off some steam’, and become more emotional to begin with. It is important that you remain receptive to this. Your job is simply to listen to and try to understand the person. If you are able to ‘hang in there’ while they discharge some of their emotion onto you, you will find they can communicate more easily, sooner.
3. **Avoid asking questions** as much as possible. If you need clarification on how the person is feeling, or what they want, you should try to guess, and then check with them. Don’t ask “why are you so upset?”, or “what do you want me to do?”. Instead, say (for instance): “It sounds as if you want _____. Is that right?” Do not evaluate, give an opinion, advise, analyse, or ask “why” they think or feels a certain way. Do your best to accept that, for the moment, they just do.
4. Initially, you should feed back to the person your best understanding of what they are trying to say to you - nothing more, nothing less. This is the best way to show and reassure them that they have your complete and close attention.

Examples:

person - “I could kill her!”

Right:

you - “You seem pretty angry at her.”

Wrong:

You: “she didn’t mean it, you shouldn’t let her bother you...”

person - “...I hate myself for doing that.”

Right:

you - “you seem to be really beating yourself up about it.”

Wrong:

you - “it’s not your fault”.

5. Try your best to track the progress you are making (ie., is the person more, or less upset/anxious?) by observing the person's behaviour. The indicators are specific to each individual, but as a general guide:
 - Voice tone should start becoming closer to a normal volume, and the speed with which they are speaking should become closer to a normal pace.
 - They will breathe more gently and slowly.
 - Their voice may also get lower in pitch when they are calmer.
 - As the person becomes calmer, they will move less quickly, and less overall.

6. The final (optional) step in this process is then to develop a plan with the person about **what to do next**. Review with the person the issues brought out during the active-listening session. This could be done in a list fashion such as, "Let me make sure I understand all we talked about. You said you were upset because _____, _____, _____, and because you _____. Is there anything I missed?" The person should then indicate if they feel understood and is ready to move on. You are then free to develop a 'plan of action' to help the person decide what to do next. It is important to keep "do nothing" as one of their options. Remember, the solution is **theirs, not yours**, so you may end up helping them do something you yourself don't entirely agree with!