

Activity 4.2 Listening to Understand

Submitted by Jessica Friedrichs¹

Last Updated 09/07/2023



Description

This activity is designed to help participants practice specific listening techniques that can be incorporated in everyday life. This activity can be adapted online but is described here as an in-person process that requires movement.

Learning Goals

- Learn and practice specific strategies of listening.
- Explore how active listening can be applied regularly in all facets of daily life.

Instructions (50 minutes)

Set Up	<p>Prepare for the Activity</p> <p>A large room with moveable chairs is required for this activity. (Refer to the CDP newsletter post on this activity for online adaptation instructions.)</p> <p>Begin by introducing the learning goals of this activity.</p>	
Step One	<p>Individually Reflect on Listening</p> <p>Share the following questions and ask participants to record their responses on a piece of paper:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you consider yourself a good listener? • Are you more comfortable listening or talking? • How do you know if someone is really listening to you? 	5 min

¹ **Citation for this activity:** Jessica Friedrichs (2023). Listening to Understand. In Hartman and Byrd (Eds), The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/activities/module-4>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

<p>Step Two</p>	<p>Introduce Listening Concepts</p> <p>Share the following concepts on a board or flip chart. Review together and record any reactions or questions about each.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Silence is golden ● Try not to relate the experience you are hearing to yourself ● Be conscious of body language ● Hear what is not said ● Balance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Open-ended questions elicit more information ○ Closed-ended questions allow you to control the conversation ○ Don't ask excessive questions ● Check understanding: recap or paraphrase what you hear to validate and clarify 	<p>10 min</p>
<p>Step Three</p>	<p>Set Up Concentric Circles</p> <p>Arrange the chairs so that they are either in concentric circles or short rows with chairs facing each other.</p> <p>Each person should be facing only one other person, so they are in pairs.</p> <p>Take into account that you will be switching pairs a few times, so make it easy for that to happen.</p> <p>After each round, one group will get up and move to the chair to their right. For example, participants in the inner circle of the concentric circle will move to the right so that they will have a new partner.</p> <p>Make sure everyone is in a chair facing one other person.</p>	<p>5 min</p>
<p>Step Four</p>	<p>Round 1 - Practice Active Listening</p> <p>Designate the inner circle to be “listeners” and the outer circle to be “speakers” for this first round.</p> <p>Explain that the listener is going to try to practice the following listening concepts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Silence is golden ● Try not to relate the experience to yourself ● Be conscious of body language ● Hearing what is not said <p>If participants are assigned to “speak,” the challenge is to continue talking for the entire time.</p> <p>If participants are assigned to “listen,” then they should not speak during this round. They will not get a chance to respond to this person so they don't need to worry about what they would say next. They are simply listening.</p>	<p>5 min</p>

	<p>Invite the speakers to talk about the following prompt for two minutes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share a life transition you've experienced. <p>Stop the discussion immediately at the 2-minute mark.</p> <p>Instruct participants to thank each other.</p>	
<p>Step Five</p>	<p>Round 2 - Switch Roles and Practice Active Listening</p> <p>Have the inner circle move over one seat to the right, while the outer circle remains where they are.</p> <p>Each person now has a new partner. Flip the roles for this round so that if the participant listened last time, now they will be speaking this time and vice versa.</p> <p>Invite the speakers to talk about the same prompt for two minutes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share a life transition you've experienced. <p>Stop the discussion immediately at the 2-minute mark.</p> <p>Instruct participants to thank each other.</p>	<p>5 min</p>
<p>Step Six</p>	<p>Round 3 - Practice Active Listening + Dialoguing</p> <p>Have the inner circle move over one seat to the right again, while the outer circle remains where they are.</p> <p>Again, each person now has a new partner.</p> <p>This round, explain that listeners will practice the following elements of listening – which include dialoguing:</p> <p>Concepts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-ended questions elicit more information • Closed-ended questions allow you to control the conversation • Don't ask excessive questions • Check understanding: recap or paraphrase what you heard to validate and clarify <p>Participants will have three minutes for this round. While the speaker responds to the prompt below, the listener may ask two or three thoughtful questions.</p>	<p>5 min</p>

	<p>Instruct listeners not to express statements (“I totally agree!”) Instead, instruct them to only ask questions (“Was there a person that was important in your life then?”)</p> <p>For 3 minutes, the speaker will respond to the following prompt with the listener asking a few questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your most significant gift? 	
Step Seven	<p>Round 4 - Switch Roles and Practice Active Listening + Dialoguing</p> <p>Pairs stay with the same person as they were with in Round 3.</p> <p>Instruct them to switch roles. The speaker will talk about the same prompt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your most significant gift? <p>Facilitator Tip: The activity is significantly more powerful if used with a particular content area and it works very well with issues that can be challenging for people to discuss. In those cases, you could use the activity to focus on the process of listening one day, and then on a later occasion, bring in a content area once participants are familiar with the process elements of listening.</p>	5 min
Step Eight	<p>Debrief as Full Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you learn about how you listen? About how you speak? • What emotions did you pick up on from the person you spoke with in each round? Was it different depending on the round/prompt and if so, why might that be? • What did you learn about power dynamics in Round 1? • As the questioner, was it hard to listen while also thinking of questions to ask? What about thinking about what you were going to say when it was your turn for a prompt? 	10 min

Reflection Journal

- Sometimes, just reminding yourself of these active listening elements before a conversation on a controversial content area is helpful. How might you make a habit of this practice?
- What might you experience if you practiced these listening elements regularly in daily life?
- Think about how listening occurs or doesn’t occur when discussing controversial or complex topics in our society and talk about how listening could connect to dialoguing about these issues to look for common ground.

Practice Journal

This week, practice the active listening techniques. Commit to really practicing active listening at home, work, or the classroom. Describe the experience. How might you intentionally continue to develop this skill?

Dive Deeper: Additional Resources

- Berg-Weger, M., & Murugan, V. (2022). *Social Work and Social Welfare: An Invitation* (6th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003182160>

Activity Cluster

4.2 Listening to Understand

[4.6 Asking Questions to Promote Curiosity](#)