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How to listen well

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FELLOWSHIP SKILLS



SHARE 

How good are we at expressing disagreement, saying sorry, being humble, forgiving and rebuking? Let's reflect together in this new series.

Has anyone ever left a family gathering and thought, *I love that no one listens in our family?* Do you know anybody who says they appreciate their workplace because no one listens? Ever met someone grateful for their spouse because *they never listen to anything I say?* No one. Nobody. Never. Never.

We all need to work on our listening skills. Tuning in to others and attending to what they say are skills we all want to receive and need to learn to give.

Here are seven practices to start with. Let's respond to God's call on us to love our neighbours by working these into the fabric of our lives.

1 Attend like no one else matters.

While most of us speak at about 125 words a minute, our minds can think at a rate of 600 words a minute. Next time we have the opportunity to listen, let's remind ourselves to treat the other person with the respect they deserve. We can offer our undivided attention by focusing our 600-word internal capacity and 125-word verbal capacity on them. What a gift it is to provide someone a clear sense that nothing else and no one else matters.

2 Keep personal experiences on hold.

When we dialogue with others, there's an underlying tension between their experience and our own. It is so tempting to use their experience as a springboard, but their short stories are not the prelude to our major novel. Let's aim to keep our reflections on hold until we know they will accurately complement the other's narrative. Allowing our experience to dominate makes us poor listeners and uses others for our own gain.

3 Resist the need to solve.

Everyone who talks with us is not asking a question that requires an answer. Nor are they presenting a problem that requires a solution. People desire relationships, crave conversation and hope for mutual sharing. Let's resist acting like a pharmacy ready to pass out the prescription so the question is answered. Instead we can value being with and walking alongside.

4 Fight the desire to evaluate.

Listening is about attending and clarifying, not assessing and evaluating. Inner voices saying, *That is wrong, I beg to differ, or How stupid* need to be muted. If we don't, our face will give it away. In the early stages the person talking with us needs us to accept what they are saying. Acknowledge it for what it is. Ears come in many shapes and sizes, but the nonjudgmental ear is always the best way to start any conversation.

5 Share sermons wisely.

I once had a colleague who, upon hearing anyone say anything negative, would shut down the conversation with, "Well, God is on the throne." Well-intentioned as they may be, poorly timed biblical and theological reflections frequently reveal an inability to listen well. They shut down conversations and prevent in-depth interaction. FYI, my recent bout with the flu has not destroyed my belief that God is on the throne.

6 Steward reactions carefully.

In high-quality interaction people respond to one another by listening well. But when reactions start everything changes. No longer are we attending, but absorbed with our own emotions. We need to steward these impulses carefully or they will take over. Responding will be replaced by reacting and others will not feel understood. Careful listening is what love for the other looks like in action.

7 Offer silence sensitively.

While listening appears to be a passive activity, it also requires verbal and nonverbal communication. Others need to experience our empathy and comprehension. At times silence is an appropriate response, but if we're always silent when people share, they have no idea whether they were even heard, much less understood. Silence used well requires special discernment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a foundation for quality listening that deserves our attention.

Just as love for God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for [believers] is learning to listen to them. . . . Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking when they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too.

Rod J. K. Wilson of Vancouver is a senior writer for *Faith Today* and author of *Thank You. I'm Sorry. Tell Me More: How to Change the World with 3 Sacred Sayings* (NavPress, 2022) and other books on counselling, fundraising and anger. For further reading he recommends Kate Murphy's book *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters* (Celadon, 2020).

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