

Basic Counseling Skills I - Active Listening

**Listening is one of the most important skills in counseling –
it is also one of the most difficult**

Unfortunately, too many counselors talk more than they listen. Concentrate on what is being said – not on what you need to say or do. Effective listening is active, not passive. Developing active listening skills is a lifelong process.

Active listening encourages the child to talk more about their issues. It leaves them with the understanding that they have been heard. It helps build the relationship between you and the child.

Just the experience of being heard can be healing

Active listening involves:

- Hearing words but also listening to how the words are being said
 - What tone of voice is being used?
 - What words are being used to describe the experience?
 - What body language is the child displaying?
 - What shows on their face?
 - Do the words flow or are there lots of hesitations?
- Listening to what is NOT being said.
- Minimal verbal responses such as “mmm...mmm”, “hmmm” or “yes”. These show that you are listening and encourages the child to keep talking.
- Be ok with silence. Don’t rush the child to speak. The word LISTEN has the same letters as the word SILENT.
- Allow children to express painful feelings. Allow them to cry. Ignoring painful feelings does not make them go away.

What gets in the way of active listening?

- Not listening to the full message of what is being said, but hearing only what you want to hear.
- Being distracted – appearing to listen when your mind is really a million miles away and you haven’t really heard a word. When you find yourself drifting away during a listening session, change your body position and focus on your listening skills

- Judging the child based on your personal values and beliefs.
- Preparing a response. If you are preparing what you will say next, you cannot be listening. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.
- Interrupting – given them time to say what they are trying to say. Be patient.

Key Points:

- ❖ **Listen with your BODY** – lean toward the child, nod. Show with your body language that you are engaged.
- ❖ **Listen with your HEART** – feel the child’s pain (empathy)
- ❖ **Listen with your EARS** – listen actively. You can listen without saying anything.
- ❖ **Listen with your EYES** – watch and observe body language. Eye contact is so important.
- ❖ **Listen with your MOUTH** – mouth mostly closed! Paraphrase and clarify what you have heard. Say “hmm” or “mmm-mmm”

Now, watch the video demonstrating active listening skills and look for examples of specific techniques. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P81t4MMxWf0>)

Take the Active Listening Self-Assessment to think about how actively you listen and identify areas for improvement

Most people are, at least from time to time, guilty of many or most of these listening bad habits. The most important thing is to be aware of your tendency to fall into these bad habits and consciously try to avoid making these mistakes. Don’t be too hard on yourself if you check many or even all of these bad habits. It is all part of human nature! Develop a plan for strengthening your listening skills on the bottom of the assessment page.

Active Listening Self-Assessment

Are You an Active Listener?

Use this self-assessment to think about how actively you listen and to identify areas for improvement. Check the box next to the number in the column that best describes your listening habits.

While someone is talking, I:	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely
Plan how I'm going to respond.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Keep eye contact with the speaker.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Take notes as appropriate.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Notice the feeling behind the words.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Find myself thinking about other things while the person is talking.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Face the person who is talking.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Watch for significant body language (expressions, gestures).	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Control fidgeting or other distracting habits.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Interrupt the speaker to make a point.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Am distracted by other demands on my time.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Listen to the message without immediately judging or evaluating it.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Ask questions to get more information and encourage the speaker to continue.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Repeat in my own words what I've just heard to ensure understanding.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1

Totals for each column: _____ + _____ + _____

Grand Total = _____

Scoring:

49–65 = You are an active listener.

31–48 = You are a good listener with room for improvement.

13–30 = You need to focus on improving your listening skills.

If you received a score between 13 and 48, develop a plan for strengthening your active listening skills. Write your ideas in the space below.