

The Rewards of Really Listening

Joanna and Cyndi are sitting at a coffee shop. Joanna has just gone through a divorce and is telling her friend all about it. To a casual observer, it looks as if Cyndi is listening. If she had a bubble of her thoughts over her head like in a comic strip the thoughts running through Cyndi's head would read: "People get divorced all the time. It's time to move on. It would help if you got over it and lost some weight. At least that's what I'd do, if this ever happened to me." Cyndi thinks she's a good listener. After all, she's not interrupting or fidgeting, is she? What Cyndi is actually doing is hearing her friend. But, like so many of us, she's just not truly *listening*.

As toddlers, we learn to speak and to hear what others are saying. As we grow we learn to read and write, along with other useful skills. But few of us ever learn one of the most vital skills of all — how to really listen. To really listen takes our whole attention and focus. The rewards are huge though: happier marriages and families, better communication at work, fewer misunderstandings between friends and others, calmer and less stressful lives. And another bonus: when you listen well, you become someone other people want listen to.

Real Listening Can Be Learned

In *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, author Michael Nichols, makes these key points about listening:

Anyone can learn to be a good listener. While some might be better than others, listening is not determined by being educated, intelligent, rich or popular. Being a really good listener has great advantages and can lead to being more popular and effectiveness. Men as well as women can learn to listen.

Listening is active. It is a mistake to think of listening as a passive act, just showing up. Real listening requires paying attention, not just to words, but body language, voice tone, and emotion. Sometimes it is even more important to listen to not just what is being said but to read between the lines. It also means responding, not just in words but with our facial expressions, head nods and comments of understanding (Really? Is that right? Uh-uh. You've got to be kidding!). It is important to show we are fully engaged.

Listening requires us to turn off the noise inside our head. To listen we have to ignore all those voices inside our heads, those judgments and criticisms... "Oh, I would never have done that" or "He just doesn't see how he's making a big mistake." It means ignoring the urge to advise and give suggestions (unless asked) and not trying to "fix" the problem or change the other person. Most of the time people are not asking for advice, solutions, criticisms — they just want to be heard, validated and acknowledged. Listening well helps us feel connected to one another.

Remaining open, not reactive is part of being a good listener. When someone tells us something we don't want to hear, we may become defensive and shut down. We may react by lashing out or justifying ourselves. True listening requires putting aside our emotional responses and need to defend ourselves. If we believe the speaker doesn't have the story right or is being unfair, that's okay. We are more likely to have a chance to offer another version of the story if they feel heard first.

Listening connects us. Listening takes time—and it's worth finding the time. Good listeners resist the urge to interrupt with their own great story. As social beings who seek to build relationships, we need to connect with others and feel we belong through activities, similar interests, family, or work. Communicating well, in a wide variety of ways, helps us feel a greater sense of belonging. Listening is the most important way to help others feel connected. As author Nichols puts it, "Listening isn't a need we have; it's a gift we give."