PART TWO
Interpersonal Communication Skills

Listening and Responding Skills

Objectives

1. Describe five elements of the listening process.
2. Identify characteristics of four listening styles.
3. Understand why we listen, and list several important barriers to effective listening.
4. Identify ways to improve your other-orientation and listening skills.
5. Identify responding skills and understand strategies for improving them.

Outline

- Listening Defined
- Listening Styles
- Listening Barriers
- Enhancing Listening Comprehension Skills
- Enhancing Empathic Listening Skills
- Enhancing Critical Listening Skills
- Enhancing Responding Skills
- Enhancing Empathic Responding Skills
- Enhancing Skills in Confirming Others
Think about your best friend. What are some of the qualities you most admire in your friend? Many people would respond that one of the most valued qualities in a friend is his or her just being there—supporting, comforting, and listening. As theologian Henri Nouwen eloquently put it:

> Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. . . . Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even dare to be silent with you.¹

Simply stated, friends listen. They listen even if we sometimes say foolish things. Again, Nouwen describes it well: “True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept.”² As we consider the essential skills of interpersonal communication, the skill of listening to others would be at or near the top of the list in terms of importance.³ Skilled communicators do more than impassively listen—they appropriately respond to what we say. They confirm that they understand and care for us by providing both verbal and nonverbal feedback. There is also evidence that listening is the quintessential skill of an effective leader.⁴

Listening and responding skills are important for several reasons. Some researchers suggest that because listening is the first communication skill that we learn (because we respond to sounds even while in our mother’s womb), it’s also the most important skill. Listening plays a key role in helping us learn to speak.

Another reason listening is important: You spend more time listening than participating in any other communication activity. In fact, you spend more time listening to others than doing almost anything else. Typical college students spend more than 80 percent of an average day communicating with other people, and as the pie chart in Figure 5.1 shows, of the total time they spend communicating, 50 percent is spent listening to others.⁵ Ironically, most people’s formal communication training focuses on writing, the activity to which they devote the least amount of communication time. Chances are that until now you have had no formal training in listening. In this chapter, we focus on this often neglected, yet crucial, skill for developing quality interpersonal relationships. Listening is the process by which people learn the most about others. In addition, we explore ways to respond appropriately to others.

### Listening Defined

“Hey, did you hear me? Where would you like to go for dinner tonight?” Shawn asks Pat. In fact, Pat probably did hear the question, but he may not have been listening. Listening is a complex process of selecting, attending to, constructing meaning from, remembering, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages.⁶ When we listen, we hear words and try to make sense out of what we hear. The essence of being a good listener is being able to accurately interpret the messages expressed by others.⁷ Hearing is the physiological process of decoding sounds. You hear when sound vibrations reach your eardrum and cause the middle ear bones—the hammer, anvil, and stirrup—to move. Eventually, these sound vibrations are translated into electrical impulses that reach the brain. In order to listen to something, you must first select that sound from competing sounds. Then you must attend to it, understand it, and remember it. A fifth activity—responding—confirms that listening has occurred.⁸

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⁵ For an analysis of the pie chart in Figure 5.1, see Neil Heron, “Do We Really Spend Most of Our Time Listening?” in Interpersonal Communication, rev. ed. (New York: Wiley, 1986), 107.
Selecting

Selecting a sound is the process of choosing one sound as you sort through the various sounds competing for your attention. As you listen to someone in an interpersonal context, you focus on the words and nonverbal messages of your partner. Even now, as you are reading this book, there are undoubtedly countless noises within earshot. Stop reading for a moment and sort through the various sounds around you. Do you hear music? Is there noise from outside? How about the murmur of voices, the tick of a clock, the hum of a computer, the whoosh of an air conditioner or furnace? To listen, you must select which of these sounds will receive your attention.

Attending

After selecting a sound, you then attend to or focus on it. Attention can be fleeting. You may attend to the sound for a moment and then move on or return to other thoughts or other sounds. As we discussed in Chapter 3, your attention is sometimes selective. Either consciously or unconsciously, you are more likely to attend to those messages that meet your needs and are consistent with your attitudes or interests. Information that is novel or intense, or that somehow relates to you, may capture your attention. And conflict, humor, new ideas, and real or concrete things command your attention more easily than abstract theories that do not relate to your interests or needs. Finally, because listening is a transactional rather than a linear process (which means that you are both sending and receiving information at the same time), your listening skill is linked to your ability to attend to specific messages, especially during conversations when you’re both talking and listening.9

Understanding

Whereas hearing is a physiological phenomenon, understanding is the process of assigning meaning to the sounds you select and to which you attend; to understand a message is to construct meaning from what you hear and see. There are several theories about how you assign meaning to words you hear, but there is no universally accepted notion of how this process works. We know that people understand best if they can relate what they are hearing to something they already know.

A second basic principle about how people understand others is this: The greater the similarity between individuals, the greater the likelihood of more accurate understanding. Individuals from different cultures who have substantially different religions, family lifestyles, values, and attitudes often have difficulty understanding each other, particularly in the early phases of a relationship.
You understand best that which you also experience. Perhaps you have heard the Montessori school philosophy: I hear, I forget; I see, I remember; I experience, I understand. Hearing alone does not create understanding. People hear over one billion words each year, but understand only a fraction of that number. Understanding happens when we derive meaning from the words we hear.

Remembering

Remembering is the process of recalling information. Some researchers theorize that you store every detail you have ever heard or witnessed; your mind operates like a hard drive on a computer. But you cannot retrieve or remember all the information. Sometimes you were present at events, yet have no recollection of what occurred.

Human brains have both short-term and long-term memory storage systems. Short-term memory is where you store almost all the information you hear. You look up a phone number in the telephone book, mumble the number to yourself, then dial the number, only to discover that the line is busy. Three minutes later, you have to look up the number again because it did not get stored in your long-term memory. Short-term storage is very limited. Just as airports have just a few short-term parking spaces, but lots of spaces for long-term parking, brains can accommodate only a few things of fleeting significance, but acres of important information. Most of us forget hundreds of bits of insignificant information that pass through our brains each day.

The information stored in long-term memory includes events, conversations, and other data that are significant. People tend to remember dramatic and vital information, as well as seemingly inconsequential details connected with such information. What were you doing on the morning of September 11, 2001, when you first heard that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center in New York? Chances are you remember precisely what you were doing. Information makes it to long-term memory because of its significance to us.

Responding

Interpersonal communication is transactive; it involves both talking and responding. You are responding to people when you let them know you understand their messages. Responses can be nonverbal; direct eye contact and head nods let your partner know you’re tuned in. Or you can respond verbally by asking questions to confirm the content of the message: “Are you saying you don’t want us to spend as much time together as we once did?” or by making statements that reflect the feelings of the speaker: “So you are frustrated that you have to wait for someone to drive you where you want to go.” We discuss responding skills in more detail later in the chapter.

Listening Styles

What’s your listening style? Do you focus more on the content of the message than on the feelings being expressed by the speaker? Or do you prefer brief sound bites of
information that you can hear quickly? Your **listening style** is your preferred way of making sense out of the spoken messages you hear. Listening researchers Kitty Watson, Larry Barker, and James Weaver found that listeners tend to fall into one of four listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, or time-oriented. There are a variety of factors that influence your listening style, including your personality and social style. Researchers Randy Dillon and Nelya McKenzie suggest that your culture and ethnicity are powerful forces that affect how you listen to others.

**People-Oriented Listeners**

As you might suspect from the label, **people-oriented listeners** tend to be comfortable with and skilled at listening to people’s feelings and emotions. They are likely to empathize and search for common areas of interest. People-oriented listeners embody many of the attributes of being other-oriented that we’ve discussed throughout the book—they seek strong interpersonal connections when listening to others. Research suggests that those who strongly prefer the people-oriented listening style will be less anxious or apprehensive about listening to other people, especially when listening to just one other person. There is also evidence that people-oriented listeners may be more empathic; they have greater skill in understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. One study also found that jurors who are people-oriented listeners tend to find the plaintiffs less at fault in civil court trials.

**Action-Oriented Listeners**

An **action-oriented listener** prefers information that is well organized, brief, and error-free. An action-oriented listener doesn’t like the speaker to tell lengthy stories and digress. The action-oriented listener may think “Get to the point” or “What am I supposed to do with this information?” when hearing a message filled with too many anecdotes or rambling, disorganized bits of information. Whereas a people-oriented listener would be more likely to focus on the feelings of the person telling the story, the action-oriented listener wants to know the point or the punch line. There is new evidence to suggest that action-oriented listeners are more likely to be more skeptical when listening to information. Researchers call this skepticism **second-guessing**—questioning the ideas and assumptions underlying a message. Rather than taking the information they hear at face value, action-oriented listeners are more likely to reinterpret or evaluate the literal message to determine whether it is true or false—they make another guess (hence the term **second-guessing**) about whether the information they are listening to is accurate.

**Content-Oriented Listeners**

If you are a **content-oriented listener**, you are more comfortable listening to complex, detailed information than are people with other listening styles. A content-oriented listener homes in on the facts, details, and evidence in a message. In fact, if a message does not include ample supporting evidence and specific details, the content-oriented listener is more likely to reject the message. Like the action-oriented listener, content-oriented listeners are likely to make second guesses about the messages they hear. Content-oriented listeners are also less apprehensive when communicating with others in group and interpersonal situations. People who have listening style preferences for both high content and high action are more likely to have a precise and attentive style of arguing with others; they leave a strong impression on others when trying to persuade them. Content-oriented listeners would make good judges or lawyers; they focus on issues and arguments and listen to see whether a speaker’s conclusion is accurate or credible.
Time-Oriented Listeners

You’re a time-oriented listener if you like your messages delivered succinctly. Time-oriented listeners are keenly aware of how much time they have to listen. They have many things on their “to-do” list; their “in basket” often overflows, so they want messages delivered quickly and briefly. Whereas a people-oriented listener might enjoy spending time over a cup of coffee catching up on the day’s activities, a time-oriented listener is more like a drive-by listener—a time-oriented listener may think, “Give me what I need so I can keep on moving to my next task or hear my next message. Don’t ramble, don’t digress, just get to the point quickly.”

Understanding Your Listening Style

Now that we’ve identified the four listening styles, you may wonder, “Do I have just one listening style, or do I have more than one style?” According to Watson and Barker, about 40 percent of all listeners use one primary listening style, especially if they are under stress. Another 40 percent of listeners prefer to use more than one style—for example, sometimes they may prefer to listen to content, and they may also want the information delivered in a short amount of time (content- and time-oriented listening styles). And about 20 percent of people do not have a specific listening style preference; these individuals may just want to avoid listening altogether, either because they are shy and don’t like to be around others in social situations, they have listener apprehension, or they are simply weary of listening to other people. There is also evidence that your listening style varies depending on what you are listening to—which is a good thing. Adapting to others is an important skill in being other-oriented. Having a flexible style suggests you are aware of both your own listening style and the listening styles of others.

Knowing your listening style can help you better understand how to adapt to various listening situations. If, for example, you know that you are a time-oriented or action-oriented listener and your friend or companion is a people-oriented listener, you and your friend will need to adjust your speaking and listening styles. When speaking to an action-oriented listener, give the listener a brief preview of what you will be talking about. You could say, “Phil, there are three things I’d like to share with you.” Stick to that structure. When speaking to a people-oriented listener, realize that he or she will feel rushed or hurried if you skip information about feelings or relationships. A people-oriented listener prefers to spend more time talking about emotions than do those with other listening styles. A time-oriented listener would like information summarized as in a concisely written business memo punctuated with bullets and lists of essential information.

What is the best listening style? It depends on the listening situation and the communication context and objectives. In a high-pressure, fast-paced job such as stock trading, you don’t have time to listen to stories about clients’ families or the latest TV show; you need information delivered quickly and efficiently. A father listening to a daughter talk about her rotten day at school would find a people-oriented listening style better for listening to his daughter pour her heart out. Being aware of your own preferred listening style and the needs of your communication partner can help you adopt a listening style that best suits the situation.

Listening Barriers

Even though people spend so much of their communication time listening, most don’t listen as well as they should. Twenty-four hours after you hear a speech, a class lecture, or a sermon, you have forgotten more than half of what was said. And it gets
worse. In another twenty-four hours, you have forgotten half of what you re-
membered, so you really remember only a quarter of the lecture.

Interpersonal listening skills may be even worse. When you listen to a speech or
lecture, you have a clearly defined listening role; one person talks, and you are ex-
pected to listen. But in interpersonal situations, you may have to alternate quickly be-
tween speaking and listening. This takes considerable skill and concentration. Often
you are thinking of what you want to say next, rather than listening.

One surprising study found that we sometimes listen better to strangers than to
intimate friends or partners. Married couples in the study tended to interrupt each
other more often and were generally less polite to each other than were strangers in-
volved in a decision-making task.21 Apparently, we take listening shortcuts when com-
municating with others in close relationships. As the Understanding Others: Adapting
to Differences feature suggests, the problem may be gender-related.

Inattentive listening is a bit like channel surfing when we watch TV—pushing the
remote control button to switch from channel to channel, avoiding commercials and
focusing for brief periods on attention-grabbing programs. When we listen to others,
we may tune in to the conversation for a moment, decide that the content is uninter-
esting, and then focus on a personal thought. These thoughts are barriers to commu-
nication, and they come in a variety of forms.

Are we more attentive listeners to TV? Apparently not. One research team phoned
TV viewers as soon as the evening news program was over. On average, most people re-
membered only about 17 percent of what they heard. And even when they were re-
minged of some of the news coverage, most averaged no better than 25 percent recall.22
Even though more highly educated viewers did a little better, the overall conclusion is
not good: We often don’t “catch” what we hear, even a few moments after hearing it.
Let’s explore several listening barriers that keep us from catching others’ meaning.

**Being Self-Absorbed**

You’re in your local grocery store during “rush hour.” It appears that most of your
community has also decided to forage for food at the same time. You want to get in
and out of the store quickly, but many shoppers are oblivious to those around
them. They stop in the aisle, blocking the path for others. They elbow their way
into crowded checkout stands. And the “express lane” that limits customers to ten
items or fewer is backed up because some shoppers have difficulty counting to ten.
You find yourself becoming tense—not just because you are hungry, but because it
seems the grocery store is filled with people who are self-absorbed; they are focused
on getting their needs met and are oblivious to the needs of others.
Part Two  Interpersonal Communication Skills

UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

Adapting to Differences

Who Listen Better, Men or Women?

Research provides no definitive answer to the question “Who listen better, men or women?” There is evidence, however, that men and women may listen somewhat differently and have different expectations about the functions of listening and talking. Language expert Deborah Tannen suggests that two of the most common complaints wives have about their husbands are “He doesn’t listen to me any more” and “He doesn’t talk to me any more.” Complaints about lack of communication are usually at the top of women’s lists of reasons for divorce but are mentioned much less often by men. Why are women more often dissatisfied with the listening and talking process than men are? Tannen’s explanation: Women expect different things from conversations than men do. There appear to be gender differences in attention styles, listening goals, and listening focus. But in the end, both men and women may listen equally well; it may be that different expectations on the part of each gender explain perceptual differences between the sexes about the quality of listening.

Different Attention Styles

Research suggests that men and women may have different attention styles. When men listen, they may be looking for a new structure or an organizational pattern for what they are hearing or trying to separate bits of information they hear. They continually shape, form, observe, inquire, and direct energy toward a goal. Men’s attention style is sometimes reported to be more emotionally controlled than women’s attention style. Women have sometimes been described as being more subjective, empathic, and emotionally involved as they listen. They are perceived as more likely to search for relationships among a pattern and to rely on more intuitive perceptions of feelings. They are also more easily distracted by competing details. Females may hear more of the message because they reject less of it. In summary, men often focus on the big picture (the forest), while women are more likely to focus on the details (the trees). These differences in attention styles and the way men and women may process information can potentially affect listening, even though we have no direct evidence linking attention style to listening skill.

Different Listening Goals

There also may be differences in listening goals. There is evidence that when men listen, they listen to solve a problem; men are more task-oriented. Women may listen to seek new information to enhance understanding about the relationship. The difference in listening goals has been summarized this way: Men listen to report, women listen to establish rapport.

What do these research studies imply about both attention styles and listening goals? They may mean that men and women focus on different parts of messages and have different listening objectives. These differences can affect relationship development. Males may need to recognize that while they are attending to a message and looking for structure to solve a problem or achieve a goal, they may hear less of the message and therefore listen less effectively. And even though many females may hear more of the message, they may need to make connections between the parts of the information they hear to look for major ideas, rather than just focusing on the details. In any case, gender-based differences in attention style and information processing may account for some of the relational problems that husbands and wives, lovers, siblings, and male and female friends experience.

Self-absorbed listeners are focused on their needs rather than on yours; the message is about them, not you. During conversations with a self-absorbed communicator, you have difficulty sustaining the conversation about anything except your self-absorbed partner’s ideas, experiences, and stories. This problem is also called conversational narcissism. To be narcissistic is to be in love with oneself, like the mythical Greek character Narcissus, who became enamored with his reflection in a pool of water.

The self-absorbed listener is actively involved in doing several things other than listening. The self-absorbed person is much more likely to interrupt others in mid-sentence, as he or she is seeking ways to focus the attention on himself or herself. The self-absorbed listener is also not focusing on his or her partner’s message but thinking about what he or she is going to say next. This focus on an internal message can keep a listener from selecting and attending to the other person’s message.

How do you short-circuit this listening problem in yourself? First, diagnose it. Note consciously when you find yourself drifting off, thinking about your agenda rather than concentrating on the speaker. Second, throttle up your powers of concentration when you find your internal messages are distracting you from listening well.

conversational narcissism

A focus on personal agendas and self-absorption rather than on the needs and ideas of others.

BEING Other-ORIENTED

When someone “pushes your hot buttons” and you find yourself becoming emotionally upset, what can you do to calm yourself and remain centered? First, simply be aware that you are becoming emotionally upset. Then take action (such as focusing on your breathing) to lower the tension you are feeling. What are other strategies to help you remain calm when someone “pushes your buttons”? 
Unchecked Emotions

Words are powerful symbols that affect people’s attitudes, behavior, and even blood pressure. Words arouse people emotionally, and your emotional state can affect how well you listen. Emotional noise occurs when emotional arousal interferes with communication effectiveness. If you grew up in a home in which R-rated language was never used, then four-letter words may be distracting to you. Words that insult your religious or ethnic heritage can be fighting words. Most people respond to certain trigger words like a bull to a waving cape; they want to charge in to correct the speaker or perhaps even do battle with him or her.

Sometimes, it is not specific words but rather concepts or ideas that cause an emotional eruption. Some talk-radio hosts try to boost their ratings by purposely using words that elicit passionate responses. Although listening to such shows can be interesting and entertaining, when your own emotions become aroused, you may lose your ability to converse effectively. Unchecked emotions can interfere with focusing on the message of another. Note that we’re primarily concerned here with negative emotions that can sap your ability to listen accurately to others. Research suggests that being in a positive emotional state can actually make you a better listener because you are able to be more attentive and focused when you are in a good mood.\(^\text{30}\)

Different Listening Focus

There also may be gender differences in the way people focus on a listening task. To be able to multitask—to work on several tasks simultaneously—is a valued skill for administrative assistants, but some people can do two things at once, and some people can’t. When it comes to listening to more than one message at a time, research suggests that men are more likely to have difficulty attending to multiple messages; when they are focused on one message, they may have more difficulty than women in carrying on a conversation with another person.\(^\text{27}\) Men have a tendency to lock on to a message, whereas women seem more adept at shifting between two or more simultaneous messages. For example, sometimes when men watch a TV program, they may seem lost in the program and oblivious to other voices around them. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to be carrying on a conversation with one person and also focusing on the television program or a message they may hear nearby. We’re not saying that women are more likely to eavesdrop intentionally—simply that some women have greater potential to listen to two things at once.

What are the implications of this research? It may be especially important for women to stop and focus on the message of others, rather than on either internal or external competing messages. And men may need to be sensitive to others who may want to speak to them, rather then becoming oblivious to their surroundings and fixated on their own internal message or on a single external message. Being able to stop competing thoughts and focus on a single message can enhance comprehension of the message on which you are focused. It’s useful, however, to make sure this message is the most important one to which you should be attending.

Different Listening Perceptions

Although it may seem that men and women have somewhat different approaches to listening, it is still not clear whether men and women are really that different when it comes to relating to one another. Communication researchers Stephanie Sargent and James Weaver suggest that pop psychology, which alleges dramatic differences between the way men and women listen, may simply be perpetuating stereotypes based on the way men and women think they are supposed to listen.\(^\text{28}\) Although some research suggests that men and women may differ somewhat in the way they respond to information, the difference may not be based in a person’s biological sex; it is more likely a reflection of differences in gender (socially constructed, cultural or co-cultural, learned behavior).

When it comes to enhancing communication and listening to one another, it is best to start, not from the position that men and women are from different planets, but rather from the position that they share common needs.\(^\text{29}\)

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**emotional noise** Form of communication interference caused by emotional arousal.
If you are listening to someone who is emotionally distraught, you will be more likely to focus on his or her emotions than on the content of the message. Communication author R. G. Owens advises that when you are communicating with someone who is emotionally excited, you should remain calm and focused and try simply to communicate your interest in the other person.

Your listening challenge is to avoid emotional sidetracks and keep your attention focused on what others are saying. When you find yourself distracted by emotional noise brought on by objectionable words or concepts, or by an emotional speaker, use self-talk (tell yourself to remain calm) to quiet the noise and steer back to the subject at hand.

Criticizing the Speaker

The late Mother Teresa once said, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.” Being critical of the speaker may distract a listener from focusing on the message. Do you remember seeing villains in movies about the Old West, waiting in the bushes, ready to jump out and ambush an unsuspecting passerby? Perhaps you know someone who is an ambush listener. This is a person who eagerly pounces on the speaker to argue, criticize, or find fault with what the other person has said. Although the ambush listener may look as if she or he is listening, in reality this type of listener is just waiting to critique the speaker for a variety of reasons.

Superficial factors such as clothing, body size and shape, age, and other aspects of personal appearance all affect our interpretation of a message. Monitor your internal dialogue to make sure you are focusing on the message rather than on judging the messenger. Good listeners say to themselves, “While it may be distracting, I am simply not going to let the appearance of this speaker keep my attention from the message.”

Differing Speech Rate and Thought Rate

Your ability to think faster than people speak is another listening pitfall. The average person speaks at a rate of 125 words a minute. Some folks talk a bit faster, others more slowly. In contrast, you have the ability to process up to 600 or 800 words a minute. The difference between your mental ability to handle words and the speed at which they arrive at your cortical centers can cause trouble, giving you time to daydream and to tune the speaker in and out and giving you the illusion that you are concentrating more attentively than you actually are.

You can turn your listening speed into an advantage if you use the extra time instead to summarize what a speaker is saying. By periodically sprinkling in mental summaries during a conversation, you can dramatically increase your listening ability and make the speech-rate/thought-rate difference work to your advantage.

Information Overload

We live in an information-rich age. We are all constantly bombarded with sights and sounds, and experts suggest that the volume of information competing for our attention is likely to become even greater in the future. BlackBerrys, satellite radio, cell phones, MP3 players, and other technological devices can interrupt conversations and distract us from listening to others.

Be on the alert for interruptions from such sources when you are talking with others. Don’t assume that because you are ready to talk, the other person is ready to listen. If your message is particularly sensitive or important, you may want to ask your listening partner, “Is this a good time to talk?” Even if he or she says yes, look for eye contact and a responsive facial expression to make sure the positive response is genuine.
External Noise

As you will recall, all the communication models in Chapter 1 include the element of noise—distractions that take your focus away from the message. Many households seem to be addicted to noise. Often, there is a TV on (sometimes more than one), a computer game beeping, and music emanating from another room. These and other sounds compete for your attention when you are listening to others.

Besides literal noise, there are other potential distractors. A headline in your evening paper about a lurid sex scandal may “shout” for your attention just when your son wants to talk with you about the science fiction story he’s trying to write. A desire to listen to your recent download of Pacific Overtures may drown out your spouse’s overtures to have a heart-to-heart talk about your family’s budget problems. The lure of music, TV, books, or your computer can all distract you from your listening task.

Distractions make it difficult to sustain attention to a message. You have a choice to make. You can attempt to listen through the competing distractions, or you can modify the environment to reduce them. Turning off the stereo, setting down the paper, and establishing eye contact with the speaker can help minimize the noise barrier.

Listener Apprehension

Not only do some people become nervous and apprehensive about speaking to others, but some are anxious about listening to others. Listener apprehension is the fear of misunderstanding or misinterpreting, or of not being able to adjust psychologically to messages spoken by others. Because some people are nervous or worried about missing the message, they do misunderstand the message; their fear and apprehension keep them from absorbing it. President Franklin Roosevelt’s admonition that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” implies correctly that fear can become “noise” and keep people from listening to messages accurately. If you are one of those people who are nervous when listening, you may experience difficulty understanding all you hear.

If you’re an apprehensive listener, you will have to work harder when you listen to others. When listening to a public speech, it may be acceptable to use a tape or digital recorder or to start taking notes; it’s not appropriate or even always possible to have a recorder or paper and pencil to take notes during interpersonal conversations. If you’re on the phone, you can take notes when you listen to help you remember the message content, but taping phone conversations without the other speaker’s consent is not ethical. Whether you’re face to face with the speaker or on the phone, what you can do is try to mentally summarize the message as you’re listening to it. Concentrating on the message by mentally summarizing what you hear can help take your mind off your anxiety and help you focus on the message.

Information overload can prevent us from being able to communicate effectively with people around us.
Enhancing Listening Comprehension Skills

Many of the listening problems that we have identified stem from focusing on one’s self rather than on the messages of others. Dale Carnegie, in his classic book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, offered this tip to enhance interpersonal relationships: “Focus first on being interested, not interesting.” In essence, he was affirming the importance of being other-oriented when listening to others.

You can become a more other-oriented listener by following three steps you probably first encountered in elementary school: (1) stop, (2) look, and (3) listen. Although these steps may seem simplistic and just common sense, they are not always common practice. They can provide the necessary structure to help you refocus your mental energies and improve your ability to comprehend the messages of others. These steps to improved listening are supported by a considerable body of listening research. Let’s consider each step separately.

**Stop**

Stop what? What should you not do in order to be a better listener? You should not be attending to off-topic “self-talk.” Your internal, self-focused messages may distract you from giving your undivided attention to what others are saying.

Most interpersonal listening problems can be traced to a single source—ourselves. While listening to others, we also “talk” to ourselves. Our internal thoughts are like a play-by-play sportscast. We mentally comment on the words and sights that we select and to which we attend. If we keep those mental comments focused on the message, they may be useful. But we often attend to our own internal dialogues instead of others’ messages. Then our listening effectiveness plummets.

Two listening researchers conducted a study to identify the specific behaviors that good listeners perform when listening. What they discovered supports our admonition that the first thing you have to do to be a better listener is to stop focusing on your own mental messages and be other-oriented. Specifically, you should take the following actions during what the researchers called the “pre-interaction phase” of listening.

- Put your own thoughts aside.
- Be there mentally as well as physically.
- Make a conscious, mindful effort to listen.
- Take adequate time to listen; don’t rush the speaker; be patient.
- Be open-minded.

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**BEING Other-ORIENTED**

At the heart of being a good listener is focusing on the other person instead of on your own thoughts and feelings. Being aware of whether your mind is truly centered on the other person or on your own internal messages is the first step to effective listening. When you are listening to others, what topics or behavior on the part of the speaker are most likely to trigger a self-oriented focus rather than an other-oriented focus in you?
It boils down to this: When you listen, you are either on-task or off-task. When you are on-task, you are concentrating on the message; when you’re off-task, your mind may be a thousand miles away. What’s important is to be mindful of what you are doing. Research suggests that you can increase your motivation to listen by reminding yourself why listening is important; sprinkling in a few on-task “self-talk” reminders of why the information you are listening to is important can enhance your listening skill.38

Two researchers studied how to enhance the performance of “professional listeners” who work in call centers, places where customers call to order products, make product suggestions, or lodge complaints.39 They found that customers preferred listeners who were focused and communicated that they were devoting their full attention to the caller. Training listeners to avoid distractions, home in on the essence of a caller’s message, and stop and focus on what the callers were telling them increased customers’ confidence and satisfaction in the speaker–listener relationship. The researchers also concluded that the ability to stop and focus on the comments of others can be taught. People who learn how to stop mental distractions can improve their listening comprehension.

Look

Nonverbal messages are powerful. As the primary ways we communicate feelings, emotions, and attitudes, they play a major role in the total communication process, particularly in the development of relationships. Facial expressions and vocal cues, as well as eye contact, posture, and use of gestures and movement, can dramatically color the meaning of a message. When the nonverbal message contradicts the verbal message, people almost always believe the nonverbal message. In listening to others, it is vital to focus not only on the words, but also on the nonverbal messages.

Accurately interpreting nonverbal messages can help you “listen between the lines” by noting what someone is not saying verbally but expressing nonverbally. By attending to your partner’s unspoken message, you are looking for the meta-message—the message about the message. Metacommunication, as you learned in Chapter 1, is communication about communication. The nonverbal meta-message provides a source of information about the emotional and relational impact of what a speaker may be expressing with the verbal message. For example, a friend may not explicitly say that he or she is angry, upset, or irritated, but his or her nonverbal cues let you know that your friend is not happy. The essence of the “look” step is to listen with your eyes as well as your ears.

Another reason to look at the other person is to establish eye contact, which signals that you are focusing your interest and attention on him or her. If your eyes are darting over your partner’s head, looking for someone else, or if you are constantly peeking at your watch, your partner will rightly get the message that you’re not really listening. Researcher Jinni Harrigan found that people telegraph desire to change roles from listener to speaker by increasing eye contact, using gestures such as a raised finger.
and shifting posture. So it is important to maintain eye contact and monitor your partner’s nonverbal signals when you are listening as well as when you are speaking.

The tricky part of the Look step is not to be distracted by nonverbal cues that may prevent you from interpreting the message correctly. A research team asked one group of college students to listen to a counselor, and another group both to watch the counselor and to listen. The students then rated the counselor’s effectiveness. Students who both saw and heard the counselor perceived him as less effective, because his distracting nonverbal behaviors affected their evaluations. So, look to discern the emotional meaning behind the words, but don’t let a speaker’s delivery distract you from what the speaker is saying.

Listen

After making a concerted effort to stop distracting internal dialogue and to look for nonverbal cues, you will be in a better position to understand the verbal messages of others. To listen is to do more than focus on facts and message details; it is to search for the essence of the speaker’s thoughts.

Research suggests that effective listeners are active rather than passive when listening. For example, during the normal course of actively listening to another person, effective listeners:

- just listen—they do not interrupt.
- respond appropriately and provide feedback—both appropriate verbal feedback (“yes, I see,” “I understand”) and nonverbal feedback (eye contact, nodding, appropriate facial expressions).
- appropriately contribute to the conversation.

Effective listeners are not only goal-oriented (listening for the point of the message) but are also people-oriented (listening to appropriately affirm the person). To maximize your listening effectiveness, we offer several more specific strategies and tips.
Determine Your Listening Goal. You listen to other people for several reasons—to learn, to enjoy yourself, to evaluate, or to provide empathic support. With so many potential listening goals and options, it is useful to decide consciously what your listening objective is.

If you are listening to someone give you directions to the city park, then your mental summaries should focus on the details of when to turn left and how many streets past the courthouse you go before you turn right. The details are crucial to achieving your objective. If, in contrast, your neighbor is telling you about her father’s triple bypass operation, then your goal is to empathize. It is probably not important that you be able to recall when her father checked into the hospital or other details. Your job is to listen patiently and to provide emotional support. Clarifying your listening objective in your own mind can help you use appropriate skills to maximize your listening effectiveness.

Transform Listening Barriers into Listening Goals. If you can transform into listening goals the listening barriers you read about earlier, you will be well on your way to improving your listening skill. Make it a goal not to focus on your personal agenda. Make it a goal to use self-talk to manage emotional noise. Set a goal not to criticize the speaker. Remind yourself before each conversation to create mental summaries that capitalize on the differences between your information processing rate and the speaker’s verbal delivery rate. And make it your business to choose a communication environment that is free of distraction from other incoming information or noise.

Mentally Summarize the Details of the Message. This strategy may seem to contradict the suggestion to avoid focusing only on facts; but if your goal is to be able to recall information, it is important to grasp the details that your partner provides. As we noted earlier, you can process words much more quickly than a person speaks. So periodically summarize the names, dates, and locations in the message. Organize the speaker’s factual information into appropriate categories or try to place events in chronological order. Without a full understanding of the details, you will likely miss the speaker’s major point.

Mentally Weave These Summaries into a Focused Major Point or a Series of Major Ideas. Facts usually make the most sense when you can use them to help support an idea or major point. So, as you summarize, try to link the facts you have organized in your mind with key ideas and principles. Use facts to enhance your critical thinking as you analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and finally summarize the key points or ideas your listening partner is making.

Practice Listening to Challenging Material. To improve or even maintain any skill, you need to practice it. Listening experts suggest that listening skills deteriorate if people do not practice what they know. Listening to difficult, challenging material can sharpen listening skills, so good listeners practice by listening to documentaries, debates, and other challenging material.

RECAP How to Improve Your Listening Comprehension Skills

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<th>Listening Skill</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stop</td>
<td>Tune out distracting competing messages.</td>
<td>Become conscious of being distracted; use on-task self-talk to remain focused.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Look</td>
<td>Become aware of the speaker’s nonverbal cues; monitor your own nonverbal cues to communicate your interest in the speaker.</td>
<td>Establish eye contact; avoid fidgeting or performing other tasks when someone is speaking to you; listen with your eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen</td>
<td>Create meaning from your partner’s verbal and nonverbal messages.</td>
<td>Mentally summarize details; link these details with main ideas.</td>
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Listening may be an even more important skill in the twenty-first century than in the past. Why? There are two reasons: recorded messages and noise. Today’s technology makes it increasingly likely that you will be listening to recorded messages. This is called **asynchronous listening**—listening to a message communicated at another time, when no one is available to receive it. Retrieving messages through voicemail or an answering machine are examples of asynchronous listening. Listening to recorded messages can be tricky, because you can’t stop the person to ask for clarification or to have information repeated. Without immediate feedback, there is greater potential for you to misunderstand a message. Yes, you can replay a message one or more times to make sure you understand it—but no matter how often you replay it, you’ll never be able to ask for more details for an example to help you understand the message. Yet another problem with asynchronous listening is that you are only listening to these recorded messages; you aren’t seeing the person delivering the message. Without the nonverbal cues that you pick up when you can see the sender of a message, the true meaning of the message may be more elusive.

Another contemporary listening challenge is noise. The prevalence of iPods and Bluetooth technology means that you and notepad ready to capture key details that you’ll need later. Of course, you can replay a message to make sure you get key information or to confirm that you’ve heard the message accurately.

Although recorded messages can be an efficient way of sharing simple information or confirming appointments, without feedback and the opportunity to seek clarification, a voice message is not conducive to managing relational conflict, especially when the topic under discussion is an emotional one. It is best to use the richest possible communication medium when dealing with difficult or sensitive topics.

**Overcoming Asynchronous Listening Barriers.** One of the things you can do to help manage the recorded messages you receive is to customize the recorded message that invites a caller to leave you a message. For example, your recorded message could remind callers to speak slowly or to repeat key information, such as phone numbers or e-mail addresses. In addition, when you listen to your messages, do so when you’re not distracted by other tasks. Trying to remember key information when you’re zipping down the highway in your car or putting around the living room doing other things compounds the listening problem. Listen to your messages in a quiet place with pen and notepad ready to capture key details that you’ll need later. Of course, you can replay a message to make sure you get key information or to confirm that you’ve heard the message accurately.

**Overcoming Noise Barriers.** Often the solution to noise distractions is simple: Get away from the noise. Turn off the music, shut off your cell phone, or move away from the distracting noise. In order to do that, you first need to be aware that noise is indeed noise. Because music and other audio distractions are ubiquitous, you may not be cognizant of their power to distract you. If someone else is the source of the noise, when appropriate, consider making a polite request to have the person reduce the volume. Sometimes just being aware that there’s ambient noise causing a listening distraction allows you to take evasive action and return to a calmer environment.

### Enhancing Empathic Listening Skills

Listening involves more than merely comprehending the words of others; it’s also about understanding and experiencing the feelings and emotions expressed. As we noted in Chapter 4, at the core of being other-oriented is cultivating **empathy**—feeling what someone else is feeling. The word *empathy* comes from a Greek word *einfuhlung*, which means “to feel with.” When a friend has “one of those days,” perhaps he or she seeks you out to talk about it. There may not be a specific problem to solve—perhaps it was just a day filled with miscommunication and squabbles with partners or coworkers. But the person wants to tell you the details. Your friend is seeking a listener who focuses attention on him or her and cares about what he or she is saying. The friend is seeking someone who will empathize.

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**asynchronous listening**
Listening to a message (on an answering machine, via voicemail, or on a cell phone) communicated at another time.

**empathy**
The emotional reaction of feeling what another person is feeling.
How do you enhance your empathic listening skills? First, you think about what the other person may be thinking by socially decentering: second, you focus on the feelings and emotions of your partner—truly empathizing with the other person.

Socially Decenter: Imagine What Your Partner Is Thinking

We’re not advocates of mindreading, yet those people who are more skilled in empathizing with others give some effort to pondering what their communication partners may be thinking and experiencing when communicating with them. Social decentering is a cognitive process in which you take into account another person’s thoughts, values, background, and perspectives as you interact with the person. This process involves viewing the world from the other person’s point of view. The greater the difference between you and your communication partner, the more difficult it is to accomplish social decentering.

There are three ways to socially decenter: (1) Develop an understanding of another person based on how you have responded when something similar has happened to you, (2) base your understanding on knowledge you have about the specific person, or (3) make generalizations about someone based on your understanding of how you think most people would feel or behave.47

Decenter by Thinking About How You Would React. When you draw on your direct experience, you use your knowledge of what happened to you in the past to help you guess how someone else may feel. To the degree that the other person is similar to you, your reactions and those of the other person will be similar. For example, suppose you are talking to a friend who has just failed a midterm exam in an important course. You have also had this experience. Your own reaction was not to worry about the failed midterm because you had confidence you could still earn a passing grade in the course. You might use this self-understanding to predict your friend’s reactions. To the degree that you are similar to your friend, your prediction will be accurate. But suppose your friend comes from a culture with high expectations for success. He might believe he has dishonored his family by his poor performance. In this situation, your understanding of your own reaction needs to be tempered by your awareness of how similar or dissimilar you and the other person are.

Decenter by Reflecting on What You Know About the Other Person. The second way to socially decenter is based on the specific knowledge we have of the person with whom we are interacting. Your memory of how your friend reacted to failing a midterm exam once before gives you a basis to more accurately predict his reaction this time. And even if you have not observed your friend’s reaction to this particular situation, you can project how you think he feels based on what you know about his personality. As relationships become more intimate, you have more information to allow you to socially decenter with greater confidence.

Decenter by Thinking About How Most People Would React. The third way to socially decenter is to apply your understanding of people in general, or of categories of people. Each of us develops personal theories about how people act. You might have a general theory to explain the behavior of men and another for that of women. You might have general theories about Mexicans, Japanese, Canadians,
Slovenians, Texans, or Iowans. As you meet someone who falls into one of your categories, you draw on that concept to socially decenter. The more you can learn about a given culture, the stronger your general theories can be, and the more effectively you can use this method of socially decentering. The key, however, is to avoid developing inaccurate, inflexible stereotypes of others and basing your perceptions of others only on those generalizations. Making snap judgments based only on past associations may lead you to inaccurate conclusions. That’s why it’s so important to become other-oriented by being a good listener, learning all you can about the other person, and not just relying on generalizations.

Besides thinking about how another may feel (socially decentering), using one or all of the three approaches we’ve described here, you can have an emotional reaction to what others do or tell you.

**Empathize: Imagine What Your Partner Is Feeling**

As we’ve noted, empathy is an emotional reaction that is similar to the one being experienced by another person. In contrast to social decentering, which is a cognitive reaction to what the other person is experiencing, empathizing is feeling what the other person feels.

Developing empathy is not a single skill but a collection of skills that help you predict how others will respond. There is clear evidence that being empathic is linked to being a better listener. Your ability to empathize with others is influenced by your personality and how you were raised, as well as by your listening habits and your skill level. There is evidence, for example, that boys whose fathers are affectionate and nurturing grow up with a greater capacity for empathy. There is also evidence that boys whose fathers are less affectionate toward them may have a tendency to compensate for the lack of close nurturing from their dads by expressing more affection toward their sons. So your capacity for empathy is both learned, based on your experiences, especially with your parents, and part of your nature.

Your sensitivity and ability to empathize with others are based, according to some researchers, on your level of emotional intelligence. The Communication and Emotion feature on page 136 may give you some insight into your skill in connecting emotionally with others as well as understanding your own emotions.

But precisely how do you empathize with others? The essential empathy action steps are the same as those needed to be an effective listener: You stop, look, and listen. Although these steps may seem quite basic, they are nonetheless crucial to making emotional connections with others.

**Stop, Look, and Listen.** Before you can accurately empathize with another person you must first focus on the person’s thoughts (socially decenter). As best you can, stop focusing on your own thoughts and needs and think about what your partner may be thinking or experiencing. View the world from the other person’s perspective.

After stopping to focus on your partner’s point of view, you look for nonverbal clues that provide information about the emotions the person is experiencing. As we noted earlier in the chapter, emotions—even those we may be trying to suppress—are communicated through nonverbal behavior. So looking for emotional cues in facial expressions and tone of voice is vital when attempting to empathize with another person.

Then, after stopping and looking, listen to the meaning of what someone is expressing. Listening is essential when identifying the underlying emotions that another person is feeling. Although your partner may not explicitly say “I’m feeling so frustrated right now,” based on the words the person does use, you may be able to identify the emotion behind the words.
**Listen Actively.** Good listening, especially listening to empathize with another, is active, not passive. To listen passively is to sit with a blank stare or a frozen facial expression. A passive listener's thoughts and feelings could be anywhere, for all the speaker knows. Those who engage in active listening, in contrast, respond mentally, verbally, and nonverbally to a speaker's message and to what the speaker is doing. Responding to what others say and do serves several specific functions in empathizing with others. First, your responses can be a measure of how accurately you understood the message. If you misunderstand a message, it will be difficult to empathize. If you burst out laughing as your friend tells you about losing his house in a flood, he'll know you either misunderstood or you weren't listening to what he was saying, or he'll think you are an insensitive oaf for not caring about his plight. Second, your responses indicate whether you agree or disagree with the comments others make. If you tell your friend that you do not approve of her comments on abortion, she'll know your position on the information she shared. Although you don't have to have the same attitudes and beliefs as others in order to empathize with them, knowing whether your positions are similar to or different from those of your partner can help you more accurately connect to that person. Finally, your responses tell speakers how they are affecting you. Monitoring your emotional reactions also gives you insight into your own emotional state. When you get tears in your eyes as you listen to your friend describe how lonely he has felt since his father died, he will know that you are affected by his pain. You will sense an empathic connection with him and may also realize that you, too, are feeling down or emotional for other reasons. On the other hand, your emotional reaction need not be of the same intensity as the emotions the other person is experiencing in order to be genuine. You may experience mild pity for your friend who has failed the midterm, in contrast to his stronger feeling of anguish and dishonor.

Some emotional reactions are almost universal and cut across cultural boundaries. You may experience empathy when seeing photos or videos depicting emotion-arousing events occurring in other countries. Seeing a mother crying while holding her sick or dying child in a refugee camp might move you to tears and a sense of sadness or loss. Empathy can enhance interpersonal interactions by creating a bond between you and the other person: When you empathize, you are confirming, comforting, and supporting the other person. Empathy can also increase your understanding of others.

Developing empathy is different from sympathizing with others. When you offer sympathy, you tell someone you are sorry he or she feels what he or she is feeling: “I’m sorry your Uncle Joe died” or “I’m sorry to hear you failed your test.” When you sympathize with others, you acknowledge their feelings. But when you empathize, you experience an emotional reaction that is similar to that of the other person; you, too, feel grief or sadness, elation or joy, excitement or apprehension—or whatever the other person is experiencing. Can people be taught to be more empathetic? Research suggests that the answer is a clear yes. One goal of this book is to enhance your skill in being other-oriented—and empathy is at the heart of being other-oriented.

Listening to empathize does not need to be the goal of every listening encounter you have; that would be tedious for both you and your listening partners. But when you do want to listen empathically, it’s important to focus on your partner to understand and experience the message from his or her perspective. Psychologist and counselor Carl Rogers summarized the value of empathy when he said, “A high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent factor in bringing about change and learning.” The short test to assess your empathy included at the end of this chapter can help you determine how effectively you empathize with others.
**RECAP** How to Be an Empathic Listener

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<th>What to Do</th>
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<td><strong>Social Decentering</strong></td>
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**Communication and Emotion**

You’ve undoubtedly heard about emotional intelligence, perhaps on TV or in the popular press. Emotional intelligence is the ability to be empathic and aware of your own emotions as well as the emotions of others. Emotionally intelligent people are also able to manage their own emotions. It has been over a decade and a half since Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* was published, and that book, along with a *Time* magazine cover story about emotional intelligence (sometimes referred to as EQ, for emotion quotient), helped to popularize the concept. But what does research about this concept tell us? Researchers Daisy Grewal and Peter Salovey have concluded that there is indeed credible research to support the interest in emotional intelligence in both popular media and scientific research. Emotional intelligence has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, including enhanced listening and leadership skills.

The notion of emotional or social “intelligence” is not new. Almost 80 years ago, Robert Thorndike, who helped pioneer early IQ tests, noted that people possess a “social intelligence,” which he defined as the ability to accurately perceive their own and others’ emotions and motivations and then to act in ways that maximize personal benefit based on these perceptions. In the early 1980s, psychologist Howard Gardner became famous for his book *Frames of Mind*, in which he suggested that there were seven types of intelligence, besides the form typically measured by standard IQ tests. According to Gardner, “interpersonal intelligence” is a key to human relationships and includes the ability to understand, identify, label, and adapt to human emotions—both one’s own emotions and the emotions of others. In other words, to be interpersonally or socially intelligent is to be skillfully other-oriented. So researches have long known that our intellectual gifts include more than having a good memory, using big words, or performing complicated mathematical calculations. Being “people smart” and understanding and adapting to the social and emotional dynamics of a relationship constitute an important type of intelligence.

The concept of emotional intelligence has evolved from early efforts to identify emotional aspects of intelligence and has become more focused than the general notion of social intelligence. One of the earliest uses of the term emotional intelligence can be traced to a Ph.D. dissertation published in 1986. In 1990 Peter Salovey and John Mayer developed a specific definition of the concept as “the ability to monitor one’s own and other’s feelings, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action.”

**Four Factors of Emotional Intelligence**

Today, researchers view emotional intelligence not as a single skill but a set of four related skills. First, someone who is emotionally intelligent has the ability to accurately perceive the emotions of others by listening to people’s voices and paying attention to facial expressions, posture, and other cues. Being able to quickly and accurately perceive what someone else is feeling (a key prerequisite to being empathic) is one of the first elements of being emotionally intelligent.

A second factor of emotional intelligence is the ability to use emotions to help you with other cognitive tasks. For example, if you know you are usually in a more productive, positive mood in the morning rather than in the evening, you will use the morning hours for tasks (such as writing) that require focused concentration. You are aware that your emotions have an impact on how you behave. Knowing which of your own emotional states will help you best perform certain tasks is one of the factors that makes you emotionally intelligent.

Third, an emotionally intelligent person is able to express his or her own...
Enhancing Critical Listening Skills

After putting it off for several months, you’ve decided to buy a new cell phone. As you begin to talk to your friends, you find a bewildering number of factors to consider: Do you want a prepaid plan? A plan that includes text messaging? Do you want to be able to check e-mail and surf the web? Receive TV signals? How many weekend minutes, evening minutes, or daily minutes of calling time do you need? You decide to head to a store to see if a salesperson can help you sort through the maze of options. The salesperson is friendly enough, but you become even more overwhelmed with the number of options, bells, and whistles to consider. As you try to make this decision, your listening goal is not to empathize with those who extol the virtues of cell phones. Nor do you need to take a multiple-choice test on the information they share. To sort through the information, you need to listen critically.

Critical listening involves listening to evaluate the quality, appropriateness, value, or importance of the information you hear. The goal of a critical listener is to use information.

emotional intelligence The ability to be aware of, to understand, and to manage one’s own emotions and those of other people.
critical listening Listening to evaluate and assess the quality, appropriateness, value, or importance of information.

emotions—to use words to accurately describe feelings, moods, and emotions. Knowing that you are nervous, happy, anxious, joyful, or whatever it may be is an important element of being emotionally intelligent. By being able to express an emotion using precise and accurate words, you demonstrate that you understand what is happening to you; you aren’t simply experiencing a vague, inexpressible feeling. In addition, being able to differentiate between similar types of emotions (such as being sad and being depressed) is a key element of being able to understand emotions.

If you understand your own emotions, you have the ability to manage them, rather than letting them manage you, which is the fourth factor of emotional intelligence. If you’re in a negative emotional state and you consciously decide to do something pleasant, such as take a walk, call a friend, or listen to music to manage the emotion, you have taken a positive action to address your emotional state. There are negative and destructive ways of managing your emotions, such as abusing alcohol or drugs. An emotionally intelligent person makes conscious choices of constructive rather than destructive ways to manage emotions. Furthermore, emotionally intelligent people can not only influence their own emotions, but also the emotions of others. A skilled public speaker, for example, knows how to use motivational appeals to persuade or motivate others. Of course, using one’s emotional intelligence to manipulate others is unethical, just as it is unethical to use one’s cognitive intelligence to be deceptive and trick others. Many thieves and con artists are quite emotionally intelligent, but they focus this intelligence on duping their victims. Being emotionally intelligent, like being cognitively intelligent, is a gift that can be used for either good or bad purposes.

Why Is Emotional Intelligence Important?

Why does it matter what your EQ is? Research has documented that people who are emotionally intelligent are better listeners and are overall more socially skilled than people who are not emotionally intelligent.63 One study found that people who were identified as more emotionally intelligent had higher job ratings from both their supervisors and their peers. Emotionally intelligent people are also perceived to be better leaders. In addition, peers report fewer conflicts with emotionally intelligent colleagues and assert that overall, they help create a positive work climate. Emotionally intelligent people also generally achieve higher positions as well as higher salaries than people who are less emotionally intelligent.64 Another study found that emotionally intelligent people had better relationships with their spouses and romantic partners.65

Emotional intelligence is a construct that is here to stay. Research continues to explore how our ability to be aware of our own emotions and the emotions of others has an impact on our relationships with others. Developing listening skills and being able to stop focusing on your own thoughts and emotions, to look (being aware of the nonverbal cues that provide clues to the emotions of others), and then to listen accurately to the messages of others are important to your interpersonal relationships.

What’s Your EQ?

Measuring emotional intelligence has been a topic of much debate and discussion among researchers who assess social skills. Some suggest it is a much too elusive and ill-defined concept to measure accurately. Yet several emotional intelligence measures have been created. One version that has received positive reviews from several researchers may be found at http://www.queendom.com.

Daniel Goleman summarizes the centrality of emotions in developing empathy by quoting Antoine de Saint-Exupery: “It is with the heart that one sees rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”66
Part Two  Interpersonal Communication Skills

138  to make a choice. Whether you’re selecting a new phone, deciding whom to vote for, choosing a potential date, or evaluating a new business plan, you will be faced with many opportunities to use your critical listening skills in interpersonal situations.

Assess Information Quality

A critical listener does not necessarily offer negative comments. A critical listener seeks to identify both good information and information that is flawed or less helpful. We call this process information triage. *Triage* is a French term that usually describes the process used by emergency medical personnel to determine which of several patients is the most severely ill or injured and needs immediate medical attention. **Information triage** is a process of evaluating and sorting out information. An effective critical listener performs information triage; he or she is able to distinguish useful and accurate information and conclusions from information that is less useful, as well as conclusions that are inaccurate or invalid.

How do you develop the ability to perform information triage? Initially, listening critically involves the same strategies as listening to comprehend, which we discussed earlier. Before you evaluate information, it’s vital that you first understand the information. Second, examine the logic or reasoning used in the message. And finally, be mindful of whether you are basing your evaluations on facts (something observed or verifiable) or inference (a conclusion based on partial information). Although courses in logic, argumentation, and public speaking often present skills to help you evaluate information, it’s also important to listen critically during interpersonal conversations.

Avoid Jumping to Conclusions

Imagine that you are a detective investigating a death. You are given the following information: (1) Leo and Moshia are found lying together on the floor; (2) Leo and Moshia are both dead; (3) Leo and Moshia are surrounded by water and broken glass; (4) on the sofa near Leo and Moshia is a cat with its back arched, apparently ready to defend itself.

Given these sketchy details, do you, the detective assigned to the case, have any theories about the cause of Leo and Moshia’s demise? Perhaps they slipped on the water, crashed into a table, broke a vase, and died (that would explain the water and broken glass). Or maybe their attacker recently left the scene, and the cat is still distressed by the commotion. Clearly, you could make several inferences (conclusions based on partial information) as to the probable cause of death. Oh yes, there is one detail we forgot to mention: Leo and Moshia are fish. Does that help?

People often spin grand explanations and hypotheses based on sketchy details. Making inferences, people may believe the “facts” clearly point to a specific conclusion. Determining the difference between a fact and an inference can help you more accurately use language to reach valid conclusions about what you see and experience.

What makes a fact a fact? Most students, when asked this question, respond by saying, “A fact is something that has been proven true.” If that is the case, **how** has something been proven true? In a court of law, a **fact** is something that has been observed or witnessed. Anything else is speculation or inference.

“Did you see my client in your house, taking your jewelry?” asks the defendant’s clever attorney.

“No,” says the plaintiff.

“Then you do not know for a fact that my client is a thief.”

“I guess not,” the plaintiff admits.
Problems occur when we respond to something as if it were a fact (something observed), when in reality it is an inference (a conclusion based on speculation):

“It’s a fact that you will be poor all of your life.”
“It’s a fact that you will fail this course.”

Both of these statements, although they may very well be true, misuse the term fact. If you cannot recognize when you are making an inference instead of stating a fact, you may give your judgments more credibility than they deserve. Being sensitive to the differences between facts and inferences can improve both critical listening and responding skills.

Enhancing Responding Skills

We’ve offered several strategies for responding to others when your goal is to comprehend information, empathize with others, or evaluate messages. Regardless of your communication goal, the quality of your communication will be enhanced when you effectively and appropriately respond to others. Responding to what you hear is natural and normal. You don’t need a textbook to tell you to respond. To be alive is to respond to stimuli that come your way. But there are some specific strategies and skills that can help you respond to others skillfully, so as to enhance the overall quality of your interpersonal relationships with others. Sometimes the best response is not a verbal response—it can be better to just keep listening. Your ability to ask appropriate questions and paraphrase what you hear can dramatically improve your understanding of a message. In addition, the timing of your responses, the usefulness of the information, the amount of detail, and the descriptiveness of your responses are important.

Don’t Interrupt

We noted earlier that one of the listening barriers people face is thinking about what they want to say next rather than just listening. And our own thoughts may lead us to blurt out a response, finish someone’s sentence, or impose our own ideas on the speaker. Resist those temptations. Before you make your point, let the other person finish his or her point. You don’t need to be a passive listener and endure a long, rambling, inarticulate verbal barrage from someone. But if interrupting others is your default listening response, you’ll likely miss much of the meaning as well as disconfirm your partner. If you do need to stop someone from talking in order to make a point, do so mindfully rather than habitually and thoughtlessly.

Ask Appropriate Questions

One of the first things to do after listening to someone share information is to ask appropriate questions to get additional details you may have missed and to make sure you understood the message.

Asking appropriate questions can help not only you but also the person sharing information with you. One research study by communication researchers Janet Bavelas, Linda Coates, and Trudy Johnson found that speakers did a better job of sharing a story if listeners asked appropriate questions and made appropriate responses to the story rather than offering no observation about what they heard.67 These researchers first asked a speaker to tell a story about a time when she or he had experienced a close call—such as narrowly missing being hurt or injured. The listener was just to listen and make no comments. In the second phase of the research study,
the listener was told to ask questions and very briefly summarize the gist of what the speaker was saying. In the third phase, the listener was to actively paraphrase what the speaker was saying—to summarize key points. Finally, in the fourth phase, listeners were to listen while mentally counting how many days it was until Christmas. Although this last condition sounds like a bizarre task, the purpose was to explore the effects of having a listener supposedly listening but not paying attention to what the speaker was saying.

Here’s what the researchers found: When the listener made no responses to the speaker, the speaker told the story less effectively. When speakers had a listener who asked questions and made specific responses in meaningful ways, the speakers were better at telling their story—they used richer details and clearer descriptions. The results suggest that an effective listener is really a “co-narrator,” or an active participant in the communication process, rather than merely a passive listener. It’s not that specific comments are better than general comments; what’s important is that the responses the listener makes should be appropriate—comments that fit the story can actually help the speaker gauge how effectively he or she is telling the story. So when you ask appropriate questions and make appropriate comments, you can help your communication partner tell a story better. Asking appropriate and thoughtful questions also communicates that you were indeed listening and interested in what your partner had to say.

**Accurately Paraphrase**

The only way to know whether you understand another person’s message is to check your understanding of the facts and ideas by paraphrasing your understanding. Verbally reflecting what you understood the speaker to say can dramatically minimize misunderstanding. Respond with a statement such as

“Are you saying . . .”

“You seem to be describing . . .”

“So the point you are making seems to be . . .”

“Here is what I understand you to mean . . .”

“So here’s what seems to have happened . . .”

Then summarize the events, details, or key points you think the speaker is trying to convey. Your summary need not be a word-for-word repetition of what the speaker has said, nor do you need to summarize the content of each phrase or minor detail. Rather, you will **paraphrase** to check the accuracy of your understanding. Here is an example:

*Juan:* This week I have so much extra work to do. I’m sorry if I haven’t been able to help keep this place clean. I know it’s my turn to do the dishes tonight, but I have to get back to work. Could you do the dishes tonight?

*Brigid:* So you want me to do the dishes tonight and for the rest of the week. Right?

*Juan:* Well, I’d like you to help with the dishes tonight. But I think I can handle it for the rest of the week.

*Brigid:* OK. So I’ll do them tonight and you take over tomorrow.

*Juan:* Yes.
Research conducted in clinical counseling settings found that when a listener paraphrases the content and feelings of a speaker, the speaker is more likely to trust and value the listener. Paraphrasing to check understanding is also a vital skill to use when you are trying to reconcile a difference of opinion. Chapter 8 shows you how to use it in that context.

**Provide Well-Timed Responses**

Feedback is usually most effective when you offer it at the earliest opportunity, particularly if your objective is to teach someone a skill. For example, if you are teaching your friend how to make your famous egg rolls, you provide a step-by-step commentary as you watch your pupil. If he makes a mistake, you don’t wait until the egg rolls are finished to tell him that he left out the cabbage. He needs immediate feedback to finish the rest of the sequence successfully.

Sometimes, however, if a person is already sensitive and upset about something, delaying feedback can be wise. Use your critical thinking skills to analyze when feedback will do the most good. Rather than automatically offering immediate correction, use the just-in-time (JIT) approach and provide feedback just before the person might make another mistake. If, for example, your daughter typically rushes through math tests and fails to check her work, remind her right before her next test to double-check her answers, not immediately after the one she just failed. To provide feedback about a relationship, select a mutually agreeable place and time when both of you are rested and relaxed; avoid hurling feedback at someone “for his own good” immediately after he offends you.

An effective listener uses questions and paraphrasing to make sure he or she understands what someone else has been saying.
Provide Usable Information

Perhaps you’ve heard this advice: Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time. It doesn’t sound pretty. And it annoys the pig. When you provide information to someone, be certain that it is useful and relevant. How can you make sure your partner can use the information you share? Try to understand your partner’s mindset. Ask yourself, “If I were this person, how would I respond to this information? Is it information I can act on? Or is it information that may make matters worse?” Under the guise of providing effective feedback, you may be tempted to tell others your complete range of feelings and emotions. But research suggests that selective feedback is best. In one study, married couples who practiced selective self-disclosure were more satisfied than couples who told everything they knew or were feeling. Immersing your partner in information that is irrelevant or that may be damaging to the relationship may be cathartic, but it may not enhance the quality of your relationship or improve understanding.

Avoid Unnecessary Details

When you are selecting meaningful information, also try to cut down on the volume of information. Don’t overwhelm your listener with details that obscure the key point of your feedback. Hit only the high points that will benefit the listener. Be brief.

Be Descriptive Rather Than Evaluative

“You’re an awful driver!” shouts Doris to Frank, her husband. Although Doris may feel she has provided simple feedback to her spouse about his skills, Frank will probably not respond warmly or even listen closely to her feedback. If Doris were to be more descriptive and less evaluative, then he might be inclined to listen: “Frank, you are traveling 70 miles an hour in a 50 miles an hour zone,” or “Frank, I get very nervous when you zigzag so fast through the freeway traffic” is a less offensive comment. It describes Frank’s behavior rather than rendering judgments about him that are likely to trigger a defensive response.

Enhancing Empathic Responding Skills

When your listening and responding goal is to empathize with another person, just imagining the emotional response of another person may not lead you to an appropriate response. Paraphrasing not only the content of what someone says but also the emotion behind the words may be helpful. And your partner may be seeking more than understanding: He or she may be seeking social support. Your listening partner may want and need to know that you care about him or her. There are ways of responding that can enhance empathy and provide meaningful emotional support.

Paraphrase Emotions

The bottom line in empathic responding is to make certain that you accurately understand how the other person is feeling. You can paraphrase, beginning with such phrases as

“So you are feeling . . .”
“You must feel . . .”
“So now you feel . . .”
In the following example of empathic responding, the listener asks questions, summarizes content, and summarizes feelings.

**David:** I think I’m in over my head. My boss gave me a job to do, and I just don’t know how to do it. I’m afraid I’ve bitten off more than I can chew.

**Mike:** (Thinks how he would feel if he were given an important task at work but did not know how to complete the task, then asks for more information.) What job did she ask you to do?

**David:** I’m supposed to do an inventory of all the items in the warehouse on the new computer system and have it finished by the end of the week. I don’t have the foggiest notion of how to start. I’ve never even used that system.

**Mike:** (Summarizes feelings.) So you feel panicked because you may not have enough time to learn the system and do the inventory.

**David:** Well, I’m not only panicked; I’m afraid I may be fired.

**Mike:** (Summarizes feelings.) So your fear that you might lose your job is getting in the way of just focusing on the task and seeing what you can get done. It’s making you feel like you made a mistake in taking this job.

**David:** That’s exactly how I feel.

Note that toward the end of the dialogue, Mike has to make a couple of tries to summarize David’s feelings accurately. Also note that Mike does a good job of listening and responding without giving advice. Just by being an active listener, you can help your partner clarify a problem.

Researcher John Gottman summarizes several specific ways to make listening active rather than passive:70

- Start by asking questions.
- Ask questions about the speaker’s goals and visions of the future.
- Look for commonalities.
- Tune in with all your attention.
- Respond with an occasional brief nod or sound.
- From time to time, paraphrase what the speaker says.
- Maintain the right amount of eye contact.
- Let go of your own agenda.

We have discussed responding empathically and listening actively using a tidy step-by-step textbook approach. In practice, you may have to back up and clarify content, ask more questions, and rethink how you would feel before you attempt to summarize how someone else feels. Conversely, you may be able to summarize feelings without asking questions or summarizing content if the message is clear and it relates to a situation with which you are very familiar. Overusing paraphrasing can slow down a conversation and make the other person uncomfortable or irritated. But if you use it judiciously, paraphrasing can help both you and your partner keep focused on the issues and ideas at hand.
Reflecting content or feeling through paraphrasing can be especially useful in the following situations:

- Before you take an important action
- Before you argue or criticize
- When your partner has strong feelings or wants to talk over a problem
- When your partner is speaking “in code” or using unclear abbreviations
- When your partner wants to understand your feelings and thoughts
- When you are talking to yourself
- When you encounter new ideas

Sometimes, however, you truly don’t understand how another person really feels. At times like this, be cautious of telling others, “I know just how you feel.” It may be more important simply to let others know that you care about them than to grill them about their feelings.

If you do decide to use paraphrasing skills, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Use your own words.
- Don’t go beyond the information communicated by the speaker.
- Be concise.
- Be specific.
- Be accurate.

Do not use paraphrasing skills if you aren’t able to be open and accepting, if you do not trust the other person to find his or her own solution, if you are using these skills as a way of hiding yourself from another, or if you feel pressured, hassled, or tired. And as we have already discussed, overuse of paraphrasing can be distracting and unnatural.

Don’t be discouraged if your initial attempts to use these skills seem awkward and uncomfortable. Any new skill takes time to learn and use well. The instructions and samples you have read should serve as guides, rather than as hard-and-fast prescriptions to follow during each conversation.

Express Helpful Social Support

There are times when it is clear that a communication partner is experiencing stress, pain, or a significant life problem. Just by listening and empathizing you can help ease the pain and help the person manage the burden. Specifically, you provide social support when you offer positive, sincere, supportive messages, both verbal and nonverbal, when helping others deal with stress, anxiety, or uncertainty. Providing social support isn’t the same as expressing pity for another person; it’s providing a response that lets the other person know that he or she is both understood and valued. Nor does offering social support mean giving advice to solve the problem or take away the fear. Giving social support is providing messages that help the person seek his or her own solution.

Most people don’t need or want dramatic, over-the-top expressions of support when experiencing pain or loss. On the other hand, mild or timid expressions of support from others are not satisfying either. One research study suggests that when we are experiencing stress, we prefer what researchers called a mid-level amount of social support. Genuine, sincere support that is not overly expressive is usually best. Research also suggests that females prefer a bit higher level of comforting response than males.
An ability to listen empathically is important when you discern that someone needs social support. What do researchers suggest are the best ways to provide supportive, empathic, comforting messages to others? Although there are no magic words or phrases that will always ease someone’s stress and anxiety, here’s a summary of social support messages that seem to be appreciated by others.\(^{73}\)

- Clearly express that you want to provide support. (“I would really like to help you.”)
- Appropriately communicate that you have positive feelings for the other person; explicitly tell the other person that you are a friend, that you care about or love him or her. (“You mean a lot to me.” “I really care about you.”)
- Express your concern about the situation that the other person is in right now. (“I’m worried about you right now because I know you’re feeling _____ [stressed, overwhelmed, sad, etc.].”)
- Indicate that you are available to help, that you have time to support the person. (“I can be here for you when you need me.”)
- Let the other person know how much you support her or him (“I’m completely with you on this.” “I’m here for you, and I’ll always be here for you because I care about you.”)
- Acknowledge that the other person is in a difficult situation. (“This must be very difficult for you.”)
- It may be appropriate to paraphrase what the other person has told you about the issue or problem that is causing stress. (“So you became upset when she told you she didn’t want to see you again.”)
- Consider asking open-ended questions to see if the other person wants to talk. (“How are you doing now?”)
- Let the other person know that you are listening and supportive by providing conversational continuers such as “Yes, then what happened?” or “Oh, I see,” or “Uh-huh.”
- After expressing your compassion, empathy, and concern, just listen.

Some types of responses are less helpful when providing social support. Here are a few things not to do, based on the conclusions of communication researchers:

- Don’t tell the other person that you know exactly how he or she feels.
- Don’t criticize or negatively evaluate the other person; he or she needs support and validation, not judgmental comments.
- Don’t tell the other person to stop feeling what he or she is feeling.
- Don’t immediately offer advice. First, just listen.
- Don’t tell the other person that “it’s going to get better from here” or that “the worst is over.”
- Don’t tell the other person that there is really nothing to worry about or that “it’s no big deal.”
- Don’t tell the other person that the problem can be solved easily. (“Oh, you can always find another girlfriend.”)
- Don’t blame the other person for the problem. (“Well, if you didn’t always drive so fast, you wouldn’t have had the accident.”)
- Don’t tell the other person that it is wrong to express feelings and emotions. (“Oh, you’re just making yourself sick. Stop crying.”)
Enhancing Skills in Confirming Others

Couple A:

Wife to husband: “I just don’t feel appreciated any more.”

Husband to wife: “Margaret, I’m so very sorry. I love you. You’re the most important person in the world to me.”

Couple B:

Wife to husband: “I just don’t feel appreciated any more.”

Husband to wife: “Well, what about my feelings? Don’t my feelings count? You’ll have to do what you have to do. What’s for dinner?”

It doesn’t take an expert in interpersonal communication to know that Couple B’s relationship is not warm and confirming. Researchers have studied the specific kinds of responses people offer to others. Some responses are confirming; other responses are disconfirming. A confirming response is an other-oriented statement that causes others to value themselves more; Wife A is likely to value herself more after her husband’s confirming response. A disconfirming response is a statement that causes others to value themselves less. Wife B knows firsthand what it’s like to have her feelings ignored and disconfirmed. Are you aware of whether your responses to others confirm them or disconfirm them? To help you be more aware of the kinds of responses you make to others, we’ll review the results of studies that identify both confirming and disconfirming responses.

Provide Confirming Responses

The adage “People judge us by our words and behavior rather than by our intent” summarizes the underlying principle of confirming responses. Those who receive your messages determine whether they have the effect you intended. Formulating confirming responses requires careful listening and attention to the other person. Does it really matter whether we confirm others? Marriage researcher John Gottman used video cameras and microphones to observe couples interacting in an apartment over an extended period of time. He found that a significant predictor of divorce was neglecting to confirm or affirm one’s marriage partner during typical, everyday conversation—even though couples who were less likely to divorce spent only a few seconds more confirming their partner than couples who eventually did divorce. His research conclusion has powerful implications: Long-lasting relationships are characterized by
supportive, confirming messages. The everyday kinds of confirmation and support we offer need not be excessive—sincere moderate, heart-felt support is evaluated as the most positive and desirable kind. We will describe several kinds of confirming responses in this section.

**Direct Acknowledgment.** When you respond directly to something another person says to you, you are acknowledging not only the statement, but also that the person is worth responding to.

*Joan:* It certainly is a nice day for a canoe trip.

*Mariko:* Yes, Joan, it’s a great day to be outside.

**Agreement About Judgments.** When you confirm someone’s evaluation of something, you are also affirming that person’s sense of taste and judgment.

*Nancy:* I think the steel guitar player’s riff was fantastic.

*Victor:* Yes, I think it was the best part of the performance.

**Supportive Response.** When you express reassurance and understanding, you are confirming a person’s right to his or her feelings.

*Lionel:* I’m disappointed that I only scored 60 on my interpersonal communication test.

*Sarah:* I’m sorry to see you so frustrated, Lionel. I know that test was important to you.

**Clarifying Response.** When you seek greater understanding of another person’s message, you are confirming that he or she is worth your time and trouble. Clarifying responses also encourage the other person to talk in order to explore his or her feelings.

*Larry:* I’m not feeling very good about my family situation these days.

*Tyrone:* Is it tough with you and Margo working different shifts?

**Expression of Positive Feeling.** We feel confirmed or valued when someone else agrees with our expression of joy or excitement.

*Lorraine:* I’m so excited! I was just promoted to associate professor.

*Dorette:* Congratulations! I’m so proud of you! Heaven knows you deserve it.

**Compliment.** When you tell people you like what they have done or said, what they are wearing, or how they look, you are confirming their sense of worth.

*Jean-Christophe:* Did you get the invitation to my party?

*Manny:* Yes! It looked so professional. I didn’t know you could do calligraphy. You’re a talented guy.

In each of these examples, note how the responder provides comments that confirm the worth or value of the other person. But keep in mind that confirming responses should be sincere. Offering false praise is manipulative, and your communication partner will probably sniff out your phoniness.
Avoid Disconfirming Responses

Some statements and responses can undermine another person’s self-worth. We offer these categories so that you can avoid using them and also recognize them when someone uses them to chip away at your self-image and self-esteem.

Impervious Response.  When a person fails to acknowledge your statement or attempt to communicate, even though you know he or she heard you, you may feel a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment.

*Rosa:* I loved your speech, Harvey.
*Harvey:* (No response, verbal or nonverbal.)

Interrupting Response.  Interrupting another person is one of the most corrosive, disconfirming responses you can make. Why is interrupting so irritating? Because when you interrupt someone, you are implying that what you have to say is more important than what the other person has to say. In effect, your behavior communicates that you are more important than the other person is. You may simply be enthusiastic or excited when the words tumble out of your mouth, interrupting your communication partner. Nonetheless, be especially mindful of not interrupting others. An interrupting response is a powerful disconfirming behavior, whether you are aware of its power or not.

*Anna:* I just heard on the news that . . .
*Sharon:* Oh yes. The stock market just went down 100 points.

Irrelevant Response.  An irrelevant response is one that has nothing at all to do with what you were saying. Chances are your partner is not listening to you at all.

*Arnold:* First we’re flying down to Rio, and then to Quito. I can hardly wait to . . .
*Peter:* They’re predicting a hard freeze tonight.

The real message Peter is sending is “I have more important things on my mind.”

Tangential Response.  A tangential response is one that acknowledges you, but that is only minimally related to what you are talking about. Again, it indicates that the other person isn’t really attending to your message.

*Richard:* This new program will help us stay within our budget.
*Samantha:* Yeah. I think I’ll save some bucks and send this letter by regular mail.
Chapter 5  Listening and Responding Skills

Impersonal Response. A response that intellectualizes and uses the third person distances the other person from you and has the effect of trivializing what you say.

Diana: Hey, Bill. I’d like to talk with you for a minute about getting your permission to take my vacation in July.

Bill: One tends to become interested in recreational pursuits about this time of year, doesn’t one?

Incoherent Response. When a speaker mumbles, rambles, or makes some unintelligible effort to respond, you may end up wondering if what you said was of any value or use to the listener.

Paolo: George, here’s my suggestion for the merger deal with Techstar. Let’s make them an offer of forty-eight dollars a share and see how they respond.

George: Huh? Well . . . so . . . well . . . hmmm . . . I’m not sure.

Incongruous Response. When a verbal message is inconsistent with nonverbal behavior, people usually believe the nonverbal message, but they usually feel confused as well. An incongruous response is like a malfunctioning traffic light with red and green lights flashing simultaneously—you’re just not sure whether the speaker wants you to go or stay.

Sue: Honey, do you want me to go grocery shopping with you?

Steve: (Shouting) OF COURSE I DO! WHY ARE YOU ASKING?

Although it may be impossible to eliminate all disconfirming responses from your repertoire, becoming aware of the power of your words and monitoring your conversation for offensive phrases may help you avoid unexpected and perhaps devastating consequences.

APPLYING AN OTHER-ORIENTATION to Listening and Responding Skills

It’s impossible to be other-oriented without listening and observing others. Listening to comprehend information, empathize, or critically evaluate what others are saying is the quintessential other-oriented skill. The following poem by an anonymous author, simply called Listen, nicely summarizes the reason listening is such an important interpersonal skill.

Listen

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn’t feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked was that you listen. Not talk or do—just hear me.

Advice is cheap: 50 cents will get you both Dear Abby and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.

And I can do for myself; I’m not helpless. Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I quit trying to convince you and can get about the business of understanding what’s behind this irrational feeling.

And when that’s clear, the answers are obvious and I don’t need advice. Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what’s behind them.

Perhaps that’s why prayer works, sometimes, for some people—because God is mute, and doesn’t give advice or try to fix things.

God just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

So, please listen and just hear me, and, if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn, and I’ll listen to you.

Anonymous
Listening Defined
(pages 118–120)
Listening and responding with verbal and nonverbal feedback are crucial parts of effective interpersonal communication. We spend more time listening than participating in any other communication activity. Listening is a complex process that involves selecting, attending to, constructing meaning from, remembering, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages.

Key Terms
Listening 118
Hearing 118
Selecting 119
Attending 119
Understanding 119
Remembering 120
Responding 120

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Describe two recent communication exchanges in which you were an effective or ineffective listener. What factors contributed to your listening skill (or lack of skill)?
2. Ethics: If you weren’t really listening when someone was speaking to you, should you admit you weren’t listening and ask the person to repeat what he or she said? Or should you say you couldn’t hear or got distracted? Is it best to be honest in such a situation?

Activities
Over the next week, in your numerous communication exchanges with friends, family members, professors, and work colleagues, make an effort to listen carefully and effectively. Then, following each exchange, make a list of at least five items that you remember (things you discussed). Is there a difference in what you remember in each case? What factors contribute to your ability to listen, attend to, and remember details of each communication?

Web Resources
http://communication.learnhub.com/test/take/1409-test-your-listening-skills This site offers a self-test of your knowledge of listening and responding to others.

Listening Styles
(pages 120–122)
Your listening style is your preferred way of making sense of the spoken messages you hear. Researchers have found that there are four distinct listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented. You may use one primary listening style or several different styles, depending on the communication context and objectives. Culture and ethnicity can also influence how you listen to others. Understanding your own listening styles and others’ styles can help you adapt to others and become a more effective listener.

Key Terms
Listening style 121
Second guessing 121
People-oriented listener 121
Content-oriented listener 121
Action-oriented listener 121
Time-oriented listener 122

Critical Thinking Questions
1. What is your primary listening style? How do you know?
2. Describe several situations in which you might modify or adapt your primary listening style. Do you find that you consciously adapt your communication to others’ listening styles? When and why? What factors contribute to the need to adapt your listening style?

Activities
Consider others with whom you frequently communicate. How would you characterize their listening styles? Make a list of people you know who are primarily people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented listeners. Do some of these people use different styles at different times? What cues help you to identify their styles? With which type of listeners do you find it easiest to communicate? Explain.

Web Resources
www.nasua.org/pdf/TipSheet1ActiveListening.pdf Provides tips and suggestions for being a better listener and for providing helpful feedback to others.
www.highgain.com/SELF/index.php3 Visit this site to try an interactive “Listening Self-Assessment” to learn about your current listening skills and what areas you may need to improve.

Listening Barriers
(pages 122–127)
Most of us don’t listen as well as we should because we tend to be self-absorbed rather than other-oriented. Also, we often focus more on how we are going to respond rather than actually listening to what the other person is saying. Barriers to effective listening include being self-absorbed, being distracted by unchecked emotions, criticizing the speaker, not taking advantage of the difference between speech rate and thought rate, being distracted by information overload and external noise, and experiencing listener apprehension.

Key Terms
Conversational narcissism 124
Ambush listener 126
Emotional noise 125
Listener apprehension 127

Critical Thinking Questions
1. What daily challenges do you encounter in listening, and especially, attending to messages? Pause to consider some of the “noise” around you right now, including electronic
and internal (emotional) or external distractions. What effect does this noise have on your ability to listen to others?

2. In this age of communication technologies, what strategies can you use to reduce information overload and listen more effectively to others’ messages?

3. Jason and Chris are roommates. They both work hard each day and come home exhausted. What suggestions would you offer to help them listen to each other effectively, even when they are tired?

### Enhancing Listening and Responding Skills (pages 128–149)

To become a better and more other-oriented listener, you can follow three simple steps: Stop, look, and listen. After you complete these three steps, you should ask questions and reflect content by paraphrasing the speaker’s message. You can further improve your ability to listen and respond empathically by seeking to understand your partner’s feelings, paraphrasing his or her emotions, and providing confirming responses. Becoming a competent listener also involves listening and responding critically by looking for faulty logic and distinguishing facts from inferences. And you can enhance your responding skills further by providing well-timed responses and usable information, by avoiding unnecessary details, and by being descriptive rather than evaluative.

### Key Terms

- **Meta-message** 129
- **Asynchronous listening** 132
- **Empathy** 132
- **Social decentring** 133
- **Sympathy** 135
- **Emotional intelligence** 136
- **Critical listening** 137
- **Information triage** 138
- **Fact** 138
- **Inference** 139
- **Paraphrase** 140
- **Social support** 144
- **Confirming response** 146
- **Disconfirming response** 146

### Critical Thinking Questions

1. Miranda and Salvador often disagree about who should handle some of the child-rearing tasks in their home. What are some effective listening skills and strategies that they can use in discussing these tasks and making sure they understand each other?

2. Ethics: Your roommate (or partner or spouse) wants to tell you about his day. You are tired and really don’t want to hear all the details. Should you fake attention so that you won’t hurt his feelings, or simply tell him you are tired and would rather not hear the details right now?

### Activities

**Test Your Empathy.** Take this short test to assess your empathy. Respond to each statement by indicating the degree to which it reflects how you typically communicate with others. Is the statement (1) Always false, (2) Usually false, (3) Sometimes false and sometimes true, (4) Usually true, or (5) Always true?

- 1. I try to understand others’ experiences from their perspectives.
- 2. I follow the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) when communicating with others.
- 3. I can “tune in” to emotions others are experiencing when we communicate.
- 4. When trying to understand how others feel, I imagine how I would feel in their situation.
- 5. I am able to tell what others are feeling without being told.
- 6. Others experience the same feelings I do in any given situation.
- 7. When others are having problems, I can imagine how they feel.
- 8. I find it hard to understand the emotions others experience.
- 9. I try to see others as they want me to see them.
- 10. I never seem to know what others are thinking when we communicate.

To find your score, first reverse the response for the five even-numbered items: If you wrote 1, make it 5; if you wrote 2, make it 4; if you wrote 3, leave it as 3; if you wrote 4, make it 2; if you wrote 5, make it 1. Next, add the numbers next to each statement. Scores range from 10 to 50. The higher your score, the more you are able to empathize.


### Web Resources

- [http://www.selfgrowth.com/test.html](http://www.selfgrowth.com/test.html) Visit this site and take a short, ten-question quiz to assess your ability to manage your emotions and be empathic toward others.
- [http://discoveryhealth.queendom.com/eiq_abridged_access.html](http://discoveryhealth.queendom.com/eiq_abridged_access.html) This online test provided by Discovery Health will help you assess your emotional intelligence.
- [http://www.listen.org/Templates/trynew.htm](http://www.listen.org/Templates/trynew.htm) The home page of the International Listening Association includes tips and resources to enhance listening skill.