

# Communication in Relationships Part Six

Jeff Parziale Ph.D., M.Div.

This time we will address a critical communication skill—listening. Most of us are horrible listeners because we spend ten times more energy formulating our next brilliant statement than we do actually attending to what the other person is saying. If we do actually hear what they are saying, we spend more time trying to refute it or defend ourselves than attempting to understand what they truly meant. Good listening is intentional. To listen intentionally means to put the full weight of your attention and focus on what your partner is saying (not what you are going to say next). The goal is to truly understand what your partner is communicating; not just the words but the meaning and feelings behind the words. Good listening builds intimacy because by it we convey that we really care about the person and what they have to say. There are several important “intentional” listening skills listed below. Which do you do well?

**Paraphrasing.** Restate in your own words what you understand the other person is saying. “What I am hearing you say is...”, “Do you mean....”, or “In other words...” By paraphrasing, your partner will feel heard and miscommunications can be avoided.

**Clarifying.** Ask more questions to get more information. Clarifying will give you the details and lets the other person know you are genuinely interested in what they are saying.

**Feedback.** Give your spouse or child information about what your reaction is to what has been said. It allows them to know how the information has affected you. Feedback should be immediate, honest, and supportive.

**Empathy.** Consider the emotional experience of the other person. What is your partner feeling? You do not have to agree, but you can listen and validate their feelings. An empathic response might be, “It sounds like you are really worried about this,” or “It sounds like you have experienced a lot of pain over this.”

**Being Open.** Do not jump to a judgment about the issue, but try to understand where your partner is coming from.

**Putting the other person at ease.** Give them time, space and permission to speak. Let your body language communicate that you are prepared to listen.

**Presenting a willingness to receive what the other person is saying.** Look at them. Nod when you can agree, ask them to explain further if you do not understand. Listen for understanding.

**Resisting telling your story.** Wait until they ask for your input before offering your story, and even then, be brief. Keep the emphasis on them.

**Asking questions.** People like to be very specific when prompted. It shows you are engaged and brings clarity to their situation.

**Put yourself in their shoes.** Do not criticize or give advice; see things from their perspective. Resist trying to fix things.

**Reflecting.** Periodically summarize what they have said. This will clarify, keep you both on track and let them know you've understood. They will also be able to hear what they have said and take it deeper.

**Removing distractions.** Good listening means being willing to turn off the TV, put down the paper or to close a door. Let the speaker know they are getting your full attention.

***Being patient.*** *Some people take longer to find the right word, to make a point or clarify an issue. Give the speaker time to get it all out before you jump in with your reply.*

***Being aware of your emotions.*** *If what someone is saying creates an emotional response in you, be especially aware of what they are saying and how you are feeling. Strong emotions tend to allow us to miss critical parts of what is being said to us.*

**Adopt a servant's heart.** Make the choice that this conversation is about your child or partner talking and you listening. Do not expect to get your point across or to teach them something; that will come with time. An attitude of respect and of trying to understand another person's world is much more important than learning how to formulate brilliant responses.

Be aware of your own personal blocks to effective listening. Resist shaming and blaming. Listen carefully to one another. Take responsibility for your part.