

Poor Listening Habits

Most people spend more time listening than they spend on any other communication activity, yet a large percentage of people never learn to listen well. One reason is that they develop poor listening habits that continue with them throughout life.

The following list contains some of the most common poor listening habits:

Not Paying Attention.

Listeners may allow themselves to be distracted or to think of something else. Also, not wanting to listen often contributes to lack of attention.

“Pseudo-listening.”

Often people who are thinking about something else deliberately try to look as though they were listening. Such pretense may leave the speaker with the impression that the listener has heard some important information or instructions offered by the speaker.

Listening but Not Hearing.

Sometimes a person listens only to facts or details or to the way they were presented and misses the real meaning.

Rehearsing.

Some people listen until they want to say something; then they quit listening, start rehearsing what they will say, and wait for an opportunity to respond.

Interrupting.

The listener does not wait until the complete meaning can be determined, but interrupts so forcefully that the speaker stops in mid-sentence.

Hearing What Is Expected.

People frequently think they heard speakers say what they expected them to say. Alternatively, they refuse to hear what they do not want to hear.

Feeling Defensive.

The listeners assume that they know the speaker's intention or why something was said, or for various other reasons, they expect to be attacked.

Listening for a Point of Disagreement.

Some listeners seem to wait for the chance to attack someone. They listen intently for points on which they can disagree.

Effective Listening Habits

One way people can improve their listening is to identify their own poor listening habits and make an effort to change them. If the listeners will then pay special attention to the circumstances that seem to invite such behavior, they can consciously attempt to change their habits. For example, if you realize that you are “pseudo-listening” to someone, you can stop and ask that person to repeat his or her last idea. You can even say, “I’m sorry; my mind was wandering.” The more you become conscious of poor listening behavior, the more likely you are to change your poor listening habits.

Besides ridding themselves of bad listening habits, people can acquire positive listening habits.

Listed below are a few descriptions of behavior that can lead to effective listening:

Paying Attention.

If people really want to be good listeners, they must, on occasion, force themselves to pay attention to the speakers. When speakers are dull conversationalists, a listener must sometimes use effort to keep from being distracted by other things. It is important not only to focus on the speakers, but to use nonverbal cues (such as eye contact, head nods, and smiles) to let them know they are being heard.

Listening for the Whole Message.

This includes looking for meaning and consistency or congruence in both the verbal and nonverbal messages and listening for ideas, feelings, and intentions as well as facts. It also includes hearing things that are unpleasant or unwelcome.

Hearing Before Evaluating.

Listening to what someone says without drawing premature conclusions is a valuable aid to listening. By questioning the speaker in a non-accusing manner, rather than giving advice or judging, a listener can often discover exactly what the speaker has in mind—which many times is quite different from what the listener had assumed.

Paraphrasing What Was Heard.

If the listener non-judgmentally paraphrases the words of the speaker and asks if that is what was meant, many misunderstandings and misinterpretations can be avoided.