



**When Words Fail:  
A Quick Guide to Active Listening  
By Gabe Avila**

Listening is a skill we can all continue to improve. It's valuable in many life situations, from daily interactions to crises. But truly listening is difficult. There are two common pitfalls:

- Trying to problem-solve
- Interjecting or comparing your own experiences with those of the speaker

How do you avoid those? One way is to practice "active listening." But what is active listening? Contrary to its name, active listening doesn't involve just staying silent and listening.

There are three parts to active listening:

- Paying attention
- Asking questions
- Reflecting

***Paying Attention***

Paying attention simply means giving your full attention to what the person is saying. You can do so by making eye contact, nodding, leaning forward slightly, and avoiding distractions like looking at your watch or tapping your fingers. You can also take note of the speaker's body language. Are they shifting in their seat? Tearful? Do they have clenched fists? All of these are clues to how the speaker is feeling. Resist the urge to fill silences. Sometimes the speaker might need that space to reflect upon their thoughts.

***Asking Questions***

Active listening encourages questions focused on the speaker. Two types of questions that are very useful are open-ended questions and clarifying questions.

*Open Ended Questions:*

- Give the speaker the space to explore their situation without judgement.
- **DON'T** ask specific questions that often make assumptions like:
  - "Didn't that make you angry?"
  - "You loved that, didn't you?"
- **DO** ask general exploratory questions like:
  - "How were you feeling when that happened?"
  - "What was that like?"

*Clarifying Questions:*

- These help you better understand the situation.
- **DON'T** elaborate with your own experiences like:

- “You know when *I* do that, I feel bad. You must feel bad too right?”
- *DO ask for more information like:*
  - “Can you give me an example so I can be sure I understand?”
  - “Can you tell me a little more about...?”
  - “Tell me what you mean when you say...”

### ***Reflecting***

Lastly, you can reflect what the speaker says. This means listening to the speaker for a bit and then summarizing to them what they said, but in your own words. Reflecting helps you figure out how much you understand of what is being shared, since the speaker might either correct you or agree with your summary. Reflecting can also allow some introspection on the part of the speaker as they see their own situation through someone else’s eyes.

These tools (paying attention, asking questions, and reflecting) can help you avoid conflict and misunderstandings, but more importantly can add depth to any conversation.

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1. “The Art of Listening.” *Stephen Ministry Training Manual*. Stephen Ministries, 2000. Pgs. 39-50.