

21 Tips On Being A Better Listener

It's not a secret. When your partner is talking to you, it's likely you're listening, but... not all the way. Your mind is already forming a response, a defense, or advice. It's okay. You can admit it.

But real listening is more than hearing words. It's noticing tone, emotion, and what's sitting underneath what's being said. When you're able to truly listen, you're telling your partner, *"You matter to me,"* without having to say it out loud.

These tips are meant to help you listen in ways that build trust instead of distance.

1. Be Present

Being present means choosing to stay in the conversation, even when you'd rather escape it. Thoughts like "when will this be over" or "this isn't that big of a deal" can keep you from really being there. Being present creates the safety your partner needs to take the risk of opening up.

What could it look like?

Your partner says, *"Do you even care what I think anymore?"* and instead of mentally checking out or getting sarcastic, you say, *"All of this is hard to hear, but I'm listening. Keep going."*

2. Pause First

Pause before answering. A 20-30-second silent pause can keep you from reacting in a way you will later regret. Pausing helps your rational brain catch up to your emotions. It also gives you time to really reflect on what you're hearing.

What could it look like?

You feel accused and want to fire back, but you pause, take a deep breath, and say, *"Okay... can we slow down? I know you're not trying to do this, but I'm feeling accused, and I really want to hear what you're trying to say."*

3. Ask Open-ended Questions

Curiosity helps your partner feel less judged and more understood. It can also help you understand what's behind their emotions and the events that have escalated them.

As a bonus, being curious about their experience helps you slow down from reacting.

What could it look like?

Instead of *"Why are you making such a big deal out of this?"* Try *"What part of what I said hurt you the most?"*

4. Look Into Their Eyes

Do you want your partner to know you're listening? Face them. Make eye contact when you can. If eye contact feels like too much, even turning your body toward them communicates, *"I'm with you."*

What could it look like?

Your partner starts talking, and you put the phone down, turn toward them, and say, "Okay, I'm listening."

5. Prepare

You can mentally prepare for hard conversations. You're less likely to turn every point your partner makes into a debate. Remind yourself, "*I might not like what I hear, but I can still listen without turning it into a fight.*"

What could it look like?

Before talking about a usually difficult topic, you tell yourself, "*Just try to understand first.*"

6. Schedule a Time

Some conversations go better when you schedule them. Not because you're avoiding the conversation, but because you want to show up calm and steady.

What could it look like?

You say, "*I want to talk about this, but I'm not in a good headspace right now. Can we talk tonight after dinner?*"

7. Summarize

Summarize what you heard before responding. You may end up responding to something that wasn't said. After summarizing, ask: "*Did I get that right?*" or "*Is there more you want to say about it?*" This helps your partner feel like you're taking their perspective into account.

What could it look like?

"So what I'm hearing is you felt dismissed when I looked at my phone. Is that it?"

8. Validate

Validation means you can see why your partner feels the way they feel. You don't need to agree with everything they say. It's at least trying to understand that what they're feeling is real to them.

What could it look like?

"Now that I hear you talk about it more, I can understand why that embarrassed you."

9. Empathy

When your partner is expressing their emotions, try to focus on what they're saying they feel. Try not to get lost in figuring out if the facts line up. Empathy is allowing your partner to talk about their feelings without trying to change how they feel.

What could it look like?

Your partner is expressing their frustration about an interview they felt went badly. You say, *'I hate that you're feeling that way about it. You want to talk about what happened?'*

10. Withhold Judgment

When you judge your partner's feelings ("What are you being so sensitive about this?"), the conversation becomes emotionally uncomfortable. You can disagree with their perspective while still respecting their emotions about it. Criticizing your partner's expression of emotions makes them feel worse about having them.

What could it look like?

Instead of "Stop crying," you say, "I can see this really got to you. I'm listening."

11. Let Your Partner Exist

When your partner is sharing, resist the urge to make it about you. Saying, "That reminds me of my cousin," or "I went through the exact same thing as a kid," denies your partner space to emotionally exist in that moment.

Bringing it back to your opinions, thoughts, emotions, or experiences shifts the focus onto you when it should be on them. This moment isn't about your story; it's about their experience.

What could it look like?

Your partner says they felt rejected, and instead of saying, "Yea I felt rejected too," you say, "Keep going, I want to hear about it."

12. Don't Get Ahead

Don't interrupt or rush them. Even if you think you already know what they're going to say, let them finish.

What could it look like?

You want to correct them mid-sentence, but you wait and let them get it all out first.

13. You Don't Need to Agree

Agreeing with every detail of their story isn't necessary. You're not listening to agree, you're listening for what's hurting them and what they need from you.

What could it look like?

"I don't remember it the same way, but I'm starting to get why you're upset."

14. Show Compassion

Compassion shows up in small ways. A softer tone, a slower pace, kind words, and calm composure help your partner feel like you're listening.

What could it look like?

Even while disagreeing, you say, *"I know this is hard for you. And it's hard for me. But I'm listening."*

15. Hold Back Opinions and Suggestions

You don't like seeing the person you love hurt, but sometimes giving advice is your way of coping with your own discomfort. It's hard to be fully present if you're only thinking about the advice you want to give them. Your opinions and suggestions can be discussed in a different conversation.

What could it look like?

Your partner is complaining about work, and instead of listing solutions, you say, *"That sounds exhausting. I'm sorry you're having to deal with all that."*

16. Take Responsibility

Pride is a barrier to listening well. It will cause you to continue a fight even when you know you're wrong. You're not required to own the whole conflict, only your part. Taking responsibility lowers your defensiveness.

What could it look like?

"I shouldn't have snapped at you. That wasn't fair."

17. Non-defensive Listening

This takes work. Defensiveness blocks understanding because it turns everything into an I'm right, you're wrong kind of debate. Try taking ownership of your role in what happened, however small.

What could it look like?

"I hear you. I did come off harsh. I'm sorry."

18. Take a Break

If you're emotionally drained, take a break. A break isn't avoidance, it's regulation. Do something that calms you. Go to the gym. Go to Target. Take a bath. Watch the game. Do what is necessary to return to the conversation relaxed and focused.

What could it look like?

"I'm too upset right now to listen well. I need 20 minutes, but I promise I'm coming back."

19. Look Beneath

Look beneath the reaction. Anger often covers hurt. Defensiveness often covers fear. When you're able to look beneath the surface, your response softens.

What could it look like?

Your partner snaps, "Whatever," and instead of snapping back, you say, "Help me understand what's happening with you right now."

20. They're not the Bad Guy

It may feel that way. But your partner is not your enemy. You're on the same side, even when you're upset.

What could it look like?

Instead of "You're always trying to start something," you say, "I know this matters to you. Help me understand it."

21. Are You Hungry?

Yes, "hangry" is real. If you're exhausted, hungry, dehydrated, or overstimulated, your nervous system will struggle to listen. Eat. Drink water. Rest. Then talk.

What could it look like?

You realize the fight started at 9 pm after a long day and no food, so you say, "Let's eat and come back to this."

Listening well doesn't mean you always get it right. It means your partner can feel safe enough to be real with you. These tips are about being intentional, not perfect. Start with one or two, practice them often, and over time, you may notice your conversations feel softer and more connected.