

How to Be a Great Listener

*Learn the Art of Listening to
Create Intimate Conversation,
Trust, and Love*



The Gottman Institute

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Building love and trust involves really listening to our partners, which is not as easy as it sounds. Asking the right questions, empathizing, and making someone feel understood are skills that can dramatically increase intimacy in any relationship.

To help you learn how to do this, we recommend that you periodically take your partner's emotional temperature. You'll ask, among other things, "How are you doing, baby?" not out of politeness, but because you really want to know.

How often is "periodically?"

Schedule these times at first, and soon it will come naturally. Try it once a day to start.

STEP 1 PREPARE YOURSELF

- Shift the focus away from yourself.
- Postpone your own agenda for a while.
- It's not about being interesting, it's about being INTERESTED—genuinely—in the other person.
- Tune into your partner's world.
- Hear your partner's pain, even if you don't agree with the details.
- Try to see your partner's world from their perspective, not your own.

Pretend you are doing Mr. Spock's Vulcan Mind Meld (from Star Trek).

STEP 2 ATTUNE

That means it's your job as a listener to be "present" with your partner. Do not minimize your partner's feelings. When you listen, do not take responsibility for your partner's feelings. Do not try to make your partner feel better. Do not try to cheer your partner up. Just tune in to how your partner is feeling.

Your goal is just to understand.

DO:

- Ask questions. Really listen to the answers.
- Follow up on the answers you get. (See pp. 9-12.)
- Ask open-ended questions (i.e., questions that can't be answered with a yes or no). These open the heart.
- Avoid judgment.
- Avoid giving advice until you fully understand or it has been asked for. Make exploratory statements that help you understand, like, "Tell me the story of that." (See pp. 13.)
- Communicate respect.
- Communicate understanding and empathy.
- Breathe. Breathe again. Self-soothe.

DON'T:

- Be critical.
- Be judgmental.
- Be defensive.
- Engage in put downs or superiority.

STEP 3 REFLECT BACK WHAT YOU HEAR

A big part of listening is witnessing. That means you listen so your partner doesn't feel so alone.

A powerful way to witness and to “be there” for your partner is to repeat back in your own words what you have heard your partner saying, and then communicate validation. You can say something like,

“I hear that you’re saying....(fill in the blank with your own words)...and it makes sense to me why you would feel that way, because...(fill in the blank with your own words).”

For example, you might witness your partner’s sadness like this:

“I hear you saying that it gets worse at night, and that you really miss the times we used to go out for Chinese food and a movie. I do understand that. I miss those times, too.”

Don't offer a suggestion, problem-solving or advice.

Or, for example, you might witness your partner’s anger by saying,

“I hear you saying that my sister can be hostile and mean. I’ve seen that in her myself at times. I totally understand why she made you mad last week. She’s gotten my goat many times in the past.”

ADVANCED LISTENING SKILLS

I. Read between the lines.

To be an even better listener, listen also to HOW your partner is saying things, not just to WHAT they are saying. For example, people sometimes speak in metaphors, sort of like poetry. They may say things like, “This apartment is becoming my cage,” or, “I feel like the train has left and I’m still standing on the platform.” Tune into those ways of talking. Use them as you reflect back to your partner what you heard. Convey understanding. What can you say? See the italics below.

“This apartment is becoming my prison.”

Wow, sounds like you really feel trapped. Is that right? Am I getting it?

“I feel like the train has left and I’m still standing on the platform.”

So you feel like the world is passing you by, and your own life is at a standstill. Is that right? That must be a terrible feeling to have.

2. Have regular stress reducing conversations.

Find out who or what is stressing your partner. Know who the main people are in your partner's life. Learn their names. Find out what the good things are in your partner's life. Do these right away.

Be understanding. Give empathy. Do not problem solve or give advice unless it is genuinely asked for.

Words of understanding MUST precede any words of advice. ALWAYS.

3. Just be there and listen.

Don't take responsibility for your partner's feelings. You don't need to do anything to be "helpful."

Within each negative emotion there is a longing. Try to understand the longing.

Listening to Anger

A common pitfall of listening to your partner's anger is taking it personally. When we hear feelings we don't like we often try to change them. For example, we hear anger and our response is to immediately apologize. But don't rush into apology before you understand the nature of the anger. Don't be afraid of your partner's anger, even if it is about you. Avoid changing the subject or getting defensive. Avoid getting angry back. Also avoid trying to cheer up your partner or to make them laugh. Instead, try to understand what the anger is about. Say, "Talk to me. I want to hear more about how you feel so I can understand it."

At times anger arises from a sense of unfairness. It can also arise from the unavailability of someone your partner needs to be close to (like you). All anger is composed of two things: (1) a goal, and (2) something blocking that goal. Find out what these two things are. What's the goal? What's preventing getting to the goal?

Ask questions like:

1. What are your concerns? (This is one of our favorite questions.)
2. What's happened recently that has made you feel so angry?
3. What do you need?
4. What can I do to be helpful to you?

If the anger is about YOU, listen and start by taking some responsibility even for a small part of the problem. **AVOID BECOMING DEFENSIVE. AVOID COUNTER-ATTACKING.**

Someone can be angry with you and it can be an opportunity for understanding and getting closer. Treat the anger with respect. Take it seriously and just try to understand it, even if you don't agree with it.

Listening to Sadness or Crying

A common pitfall of listening to your partner's feelings is to try to change them. We hear sadness, for example, and want to try and cheer up our partner or to make them laugh. Avoid doing this. Instead, find out what is lost or missing from the person who is sad. Try to understand what the sadness or the tears are about. Say, "Talk to me, honey. I want to hear

more about how you feel so I can understand it.” Avoid giving solutions, like, “Why don’t you just call up your sister and spend the day with her?” Don’t be afraid of sadness. Just try to understand it. You are a traveler and your partner is the tour guide into their unique landscape of sadness. Let your partner describe how that feels.

Listening to Fear

Everyone develops their own intuitive sense of safety in the world. Although you may not agree with their reasoning, something is making a fearful person feel unsafe. What is it? A common pitfall of listening to your partner’s fear is to minimize it by being reassuring. To the fearful person, that can seem like ridiculing a legitimate concern. It has been shown that ignoring a gut feeling that something isn’t right can lead to trouble down the road. We need to listen to fear instead of dismissing our feelings. The gift of fear can keep us safe. So find out:

1. What are your concerns?
2. What’s happened recently that has made you feel unsafe?
3. What do you need to feel safe?
4. What can I do to be helpful to you?

If the fear is about YOU, listen and start by taking some responsibility for even a small part of the problem. **AVOID BECOMING DEFENSIVE. AVOID COUNTER-ATTACKING.** For example, if your partner says, “I get scared when you yell at me,” don’t say, “I wouldn’t have to yell if you just listened to me!” Instead say, “Yes, I’m sorry. I know I can get pretty loud sometimes. I will try to watch that.”

Avoid dismissing fear or trying to change it. We hear fear, for example, and our response is to try to say something like, “Don’t be silly. There’s nothing at all to be afraid of” or “Why don’t you just turn on all the lights if you’re afraid of the dark?” That doesn’t reassure anyone. Instead try to understand what the fear is about. Say, “Talk to me. I want to hear more about how you feel so I can understand it.”

4. Self-Disclose.

DON’T STAY HIDDEN or INVISIBLE. Be authentic. Don’t avoid talking about your reality as an act of kindness or to protect your partner. Your partner wants to know you, to be a part of your life. So how do you do that?

Talk about your day or week. Who are the cast of characters in your life? What are their nicknames? How do you feel about each of them? What is daily life like for you? What are you enjoying? What is stressful for you? What are you struggling with?

Open your inner heart to your partner. What kinds of feelings are you having? Every feeling has inside it a **LONGING**, a desire, a wish. So, feelings contain a kind of recipe for what you might need from your partner. Tell your partner what you need from them right now. Ask for what you need. Do not think you’re burdening your partner by expressing your needs. You are giving them a chance to shine for you!

And do not go outside the boundaries of the relationship to get your love needs met, this almost always makes the situation worse.

Questions You Can Ask As You Listen

1. What are you feeling?
2. What else are you feeling?
3. What are your primary needs here?
4. What do you really wish for?
5. How did this all evolve?
6. Who are the main characters in these feelings you're talking about?
7. What would you really like to say here, and to whom?
8. What are the feelings here you are afraid to even think about?
9. Do you have any mixed feelings here? What are they?
10. What are your choices as you see them?
11. What are the positive and negative aspects of each of your choices?
12. Do you think this has affected our relationship (or other relationships). If so, how?
13. Is there some way you wish you could have done things differently? How so?
14. What are your obligations (or duties) here?
15. Do you have a choice to make?
16. What would you really like to ask of me?
17. What do your values tell you about all this?
18. Think of someone you really admire. What would they do and how would they view this situation?
19. Do these feelings and needs have any spiritual, moral, ethical, or religious meaning for you?
20. Is there anyone or anything you disapprove of here?

21. Is there anything or anyone you admire here?
22. Is there anything you've learned from this?
23. Who is going to be most affected here? How will they be affected? Why?
24. Does this remind you of anything else in your personal history?
25. What meaning does this have for you to bring this up now?
26. How does this affect your identity, your idea of yourself?
27. How does this situation touch you?
28. How does this situation change you?
29. How have you changed or how are you changing now, and how has that affected this situation?
30. How did this all begin, what was the very start?
31. What's your major reaction or complaint here?
32. Who do you think is most at fault here?
33. How do you think things would be resolved in the next five years?
34. How do you *wish* things would be resolved in the next five years?
35. What are your goals here?
36. How are you thinking about how all of this fits into your life as a whole?
37. What, if anything, makes you angry in this situation?
38. What are the "shoulds" here? (Like, what should you take responsibility for?)
39. What is your biggest "turn off" about this?
40. Are there parts of yourself that are in conflict?
41. What is most important part of this conversation for you?

Express Empathy and Understanding As You Listen

1. You're making total sense.
2. I understand how you feel.
3. You must feel so hopeless.
4. I just feel such despair in you when you talk about this.
5. You're in a tough spot here.
6. I can feel the pain you feel.
7. The world needs to stop when you're in this much pain.
8. I wish you didn't have to go through that.
9. I'm on your side here.
10. I wish I could have been with you in that moment.
11. Oh, wow, that sounds terrible.
12. You must feel so helpless.
13. That hurts me to hear that.
14. I support your position here.
15. I totally agree with you.
16. You are feeling so trapped!
17. You are making total sense.
18. That sounds like you felt really disgusted!
19. No wonder you're upset.
20. I'd feel the same way you do in your situation.
21. I think you're right.
22. I see. Let me summarize: What you're thinking here is...

23. You are in a lot of pain here. I can feel it.
24. It would be great to be free of this.
25. That must have annoyed you.
26. That would make me mad, too.
27. That sounds infuriating.
28. That sounds very frustrating.
29. That is very scary.
30. Well I agree with most of what you're saying.
31. I would have also been disappointed by that.
32. That would have hurt my feelings also.
33. That would make me sad too.
34. POOR BABY!!!
35. Wow! That must have hurt.
36. I understand what you are feeling.
37. You are making a lot of sense to me.
38. Okay, I think I get it. So what you are feeling is...
39. Let me try to paraphrase and summarize what you're saying. You're saying....
40. I would have trouble coping with that.
41. What I admire most about what you're doing is...
42. That would make me feel insecure.
43. That sounds a little frightening.
44. Tell me what you see as your choices here.

Statements to Explore Feelings and Needs As You Listen

1. Tell me the story of that.
2. I want to know everything you're feeling.
3. Talk to me. I am listening.
4. Nothing is more important to me right now than listening to you.
5. I am committed to listening to you without judgement or evaluation.
6. We have lots of time to talk.
7. Tell me your major priorities here.
8. Tell me what you need right now.
9. Tell me what you think your choices are.
10. It's okay not to know what to do here, but what's your guess?
11. I think you're being very clear. Go on.
12. Tell me all of your feelings here.
13. Help me understand your feelings a little better. Say more.
14. I think that you have already thought of some solutions. Tell me what they are.
15. Help me understand this situation from your point of view. What are the most important points for you?
16. Tell me what you're most concerned about.
17. Tell me more about how you are seeing this situation.
18. Talk about what the decision is that you think you have to make.
19. If you could change the attitudes of one of the key people in this situation, talk about what you would do.

LISTENING EXERCISE

Good listening creates intimate conversation, trust, and love!

Take turns asking your partner the following questions. Then use the lists on previous pages for specific things you can ask or say to help you learn to be a great listener.

Tell me what in this world is currently making you:

1. Angry.
2. Sad.
3. Afraid or worried.
4. Hopeful.
5. Happy.
6. Optimistic.
7. Feel despair.
8. Stressed.
9. Inspired.
10. Proud.

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OTHER GOTTMAN RELATIONSHIP GUIDES:

Aftermath of a Fight

Fondness & Admiration

Avoid the Four Horsemen

Relaxation

Small Things Often

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