

How-To Listen Effectively

You are sitting in a packed auditorium. The speaker is at the lectern up front. He is moderately boring but his message is important. Your attention, however, is wandering. You've missed the main point, but still nod your head as if you understood? This behavior is common. It happens to us all the time. We listen to a myriad of conversations; however, we usually comprehend little of what is being said. Whether it's in an auditorium or on a date, it is important to comprehend and not just sit there bobbing your head up and down like a circus-dummy. The person talking can usually tell if you're listening anyway, and while it is easier to hide in a crowd, when it comes to dating, it's something that can make or break a budding relationship.

So, how do we learn to really listen and comprehend? Now, granted, there are some conversations you don't want to hear. I'm not referring to these. In the cases when you really want to learn something or hear someone, however, you need to develop some discipline through self-training. The first thing you need to do is to grab control of your thoughts. Thoughts are both your ally and your enemy. You cannot be a good listener if your mind is here, there and everywhere. This happens more often when a phrase or statement triggers your memory to produce a picture, feeling or conversation from the past. At this point, you lose the thread of the conversation and comprehension goes down the drain. You need to pull your thoughts back and refocus. This is not easy, because your mind - once engaged - is a machine on autopilot delivering you the full memory complete with sounds and vision. It flies off in all directions, many times against your bidding.

A good way to make your mind focus is to train yourself to stay focused for longer and longer periods of time when not actually engaged in listening in real life. By concentrating on a thing, gently yet firmly pushing other thoughts out of your mind, you will by exercise increase your ability to focus. You can do this by concentrating on reading a book, listening intently to the radio or watching television. If you're listening to the radio or a speech, let it run for a fixed period of time, no more than 3-5 minutes to start. Remember, your brain is out of shape and like physical exercise you need to build up your ability to concentrate slowly and steadily. Speeches or audio books were really well for this exercise in that they are speakers who go on for a while without a break. You really need to concentrate or you will lose your place, just like when you're really listening to a person.

As the speech or audio book runs, concentrate. If you lose your train of thought, start over and keep trying until you can listen without a break for five minutes. You might want to vary the speeches or audio books that you're using. It's not what you're listening to; it's the length of time you can listen without your mind intruding with its own thoughts.

When you have mastered the five minutes of listening without uninterrupted thoughts, then increase it to ten and repeat the exercise until you master ten minutes. You will find that you can concentrate and comprehend more by taking these simple steps. Switch off and try this with a video. Video is more difficult in that it has visual as well as audio. Where you see the speaker doing something physically, you'll need to train yourself not to allow your mind to run off on a tangent - what he looks like, what he reminds you of, etc. When you master this, you are ready for a real world trial.

In actuality, as you practice, you will notice concentration improving and your mind calming down. You are now ready to listen to people in real life. Your mind will stay more focused, and you will find that you are a better listener. This works in both school and life, in that, if you are on a date and they really feel that you have listened and comprehended what they are communicating, rapport will be established quicker and your return will be better. The person speaking will feel as though you have genuinely understood them which is the beginnings of a great relationship.

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