



How to Be a Good Listener



THE CHALLENGE

“You’re not listening to me!” your spouse says. ‘But I was,’ you tell yourself. Evidently, though, what you heard is different from what your spouse said. As a result, another argument erupts.

You *can* avoid these conflicts. First, though, you need to understand why you might miss important details in what your spouse is saying—even though you think that you are listening.



WHY IT HAPPENS

You are distracted, tired, or both. The kids are yelling, the television is blaring, and you are thinking about a problem you had at work. Now your spouse starts talking to you—something about expecting visitors tonight. You nod “OK,” but did you really hear what was said? Likely not.

You make assumptions. This has been called a damaging form of “mind reading.” You *assume* that there is a hidden message behind your spouse’s words, when in fact you may be reading too much into the situation. For example, suppose your spouse says: “You’ve spent a lot of extra time at work this week.” Interpreting this as criticism, you say: “It’s not my fault! I have to work extra hours because you are running up our bills.” “I wasn’t blaming you!” shouts your mate—whose original intention was merely to suggest a relaxing weekend together.

You look for solutions prematurely. “Sometimes I just want to express how I feel,” says Marcie,* “but Mike wants to tell me how to fix it. I don’t want to fix it. I just want him to know how I’m feeling.” The problem? Mike’s mind is racing to find a solution. As a result, he will probably miss some or all of what Marcie is saying.

Whatever the cause of the problem, how can you become a better listener?

* Names in this article have been changed.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Give your complete attention. Your spouse has something important to say, but are you *ready* to listen? Perhaps not. Your mind may be on other things just now. If so, do not *pretend* to listen. If possible, put aside what you are doing and give your mate your full attention, or perhaps you could ask your mate to wait until you are able to do so.—*Bible principle: James 1:19.*

Agree to speak one at a time. When it is your turn to listen, resist the urge to interrupt or disagree. You will get your turn to speak. For now, just listen.—*Bible principle: Proverbs 18:13.*

Ask questions. This will make you better able to understand what your mate is saying. Marcie, quoted earlier, says: “I love it when Mike asks questions. It shows me that he’s interested in what I’m saying.”

Listen for the message, not just the words. Note what is conveyed by body language, eye movement, and tone of voice. “That’s fine” might really mean “That’s *not* fine”—depending on how it is said. “You never offer to help me” might really mean “I feel I’m not important to you.” Try to get the real message, even if it is not spoken. Otherwise, you may end up debating over what was *said* instead of focusing on what was *meant*.

Keep listening. Do not tune out or walk away, even if what you are hearing displeases you. For example, what if your mate is criticizing you? “Keep listening,” advises Gregory, who has been married for over 60 years. “Give genuine consideration to what your mate is saying. This takes a measure of maturity, but it pays off.”—*Bible principle: Proverbs 18:15.*

Be sincerely interested in your mate. Active listening is, not a mere technique, but an act of love. When you have genuine interest in what your mate is saying, listening becomes less forced and more natural. In this way you will be following the Bible’s admonition: “Look out for one another’s interests, not just for your own.”—*Philippians 2:4, Good News Translation.* ■

KEY SCRIPTURES

“Be swift about hearing, slow about speaking.”—James 1:19.

“When anyone is replying to a matter before he hears it, that is foolishness on his part and a humiliation.”—Proverbs 18:13.

“The ear of wise ones seeks to find knowledge.”—Proverbs 18:15.

IF YOU ARE SPEAKING

If you try to talk while your mate is in another room or is concentrating on something else, will he or she hear what you say? It might be better to get your mate’s full attention first or wait for a better opportunity.—1 Peter 3:8.

Consider a Bible example: When Jesus had an important point to make about humility, he did not simply blurt it out. He waited until circumstances were conducive to listening. Then he called his apostles to him and made his point.—Mark 9:33-35; 12:41-44.