

Listen Like You Mean It

What's in it for me? Learn how to listen empathetically and deepen your connections with others.

How good are your listening skills? Most of us aren't terrible listeners – but we aren't all natural aces, either. We might come away from a conversation having heard only one part of the story. We might have misunderstood a friend's feelings about a particular situation. Or we might believe we successfully empathized, when, really, we failed to listen and instead made the conversation all about us. When these issues crop up, we end up feeling distanced from our conversation partners. Especially today, as so many of our conversations have moved to our devices, it's essential to cultivate warmth and honesty in our face-to-face interactions as often as we can. Let these blinks be your guide to listening like you mean it. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to stay present in a conversation; how the words “yes, and” can help you; and what men and women each mean when they say “hm-hmm.”

Approach conversations with the intention of really focusing on and engaging with your partner.

A young researcher, Eve, and her mentor, Mia, were exploring the issue of cyberbullying on their company's platform. That process involved interviewing celebrities and others who regularly become the targets of abusive comments online. Eve and Mia had gotten to their third

interviewee when Eve made a serious conversational blunder. She said to the participant, "And the people who write mean things about you – you just ignore them, right?" The participant responded that he actually found it difficult to ignore cyberbullies, though he wished he could. Eve responded, "Right, so you would ignore them. Makes sense." It's easy to see the problem with Eve's approach here. She was making assumptions based on what she'd heard from other interviewees, and she neglected to consider that this participant's experience may have been entirely different. The key message here is: Approach conversations with the intention of really focusing on and engaging with your partner. Eve was doing what the author calls surface listening. This is when you hear the words that someone is literally saying but don't bother paying attention to the underlying meaning. Surface listening might cause you to offer unsolicited advice, interrupt your conversation partner, or assume her experience has been the same as yours. What you want to do instead is engage in empathetic listening, which involves making a concerted effort to understand the meaning behind your conversation partner's words. This activates the listening loop – a virtuous cycle in which your partner feels free to express her emotions, and you in turn are encouraged to express your own. To get in the mindset for empathetic listening, you'll need to cultivate three distinct qualities: empathy, humility, and curiosity. Empathy is all about being able to imagine what someone else is feeling without necessarily injecting your own experiences into the conversation. To foster this quality, remind yourself that the conversation isn't all about you, and ask questions specific to the other person. Next, there's humility, which involves refraining from passing judgment on your conversation partner's experiences. Remember that you don't have all the answers, and reassure your partner that she's free to share everything – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Finally, there's curiosity. Curiosity means being open to what your partner has to say, even if it's not a topic toward which you're naturally inclined. Find something that interests you in whatever your partner has to say, and you'll open the door to a conversation that satisfies everyone.

Stay present in a conversation by observing yourself and your partner carefully.

Have you ever had a conversation bright and early with someone who was definitely not a morning person? If so, you probably noticed him giving half-hearted answers, barely paying attention, or yawning every few moments. Alternatively, perhaps you've been that person yourself! Whether you're an early bird or a night owl, there are bound to be certain times of day when your energy is low and you find it hard to be fully present. When that's the case, the quality of your conversations suffers greatly. Being fully present is a crucial aspect of empathetic listening. Here's the key message: Stay present in a conversation by observing yourself and your partner carefully. When it comes to being present, self-awareness is key. Be mindful of your energy levels and mental state during a conversation. If you haven't eaten in hours or it's late in the afternoon and your brain is fried, it's worth being up-front about that with your partner. Don't be afraid to ask to move the conversation to a café or to suggest revisiting the topic at a different time. In addition to being a careful observer of yourself, it's equally important to pay attention to how your conversation partner may be feeling. Often, people's words are at odds with their experiences and actions. They may say that they only drink one glass of wine per night, while the real number might be two or three. People conceal or distort the truth for all kinds of reasons. Establishing true connection requires us to be careful observers of a conversation partner's emotional indicators. These are things like body language, word choice, and voice and tone. Consider eye contact, for instance. Sustained eye contact can indicate that someone is feeling curious, open, or affectionate. Lack of eye contact, on the other hand, can indicate feelings of unease or lack of safety. If someone's emotional indicators tell you he isn't revealing the whole truth, try nudging him toward honesty with a prompt like "Help me understand what you mean by . . ." or "Tell me how you really feel about" Assure him that you value his honest perspective and input. When you remain present and show your partner that you're genuinely interested in what he has to say, he'll be much more likely to express himself honestly.

Identify what your conversation partner needs from you, and then try to provide it.

Do you know what your listening style is – that is, the role you gravitate toward in conversation? There are lots of them out there, and each of us tends to lean toward one or another. For instance, are you an explainer – the kind of person who offers a rational answer for everything, even when your conversation partner might not want her feelings analyzed? Are you an identifier – someone who always tries to relate a friend's experiences to your own at the risk of making the conversation all about you? Or maybe you're an interviewer, who asks so many questions that the conversation ends up feeling like an interrogation? Each listening style can be appropriate at certain times – and less so at others. By understanding and clarifying your role in each conversation, you and your partner are more likely to remain on the same page. The key message is this: Identify what your conversation partner needs from you, and then try to provide it. When you're aware of your default listening style, you can adapt it to suit your conversation partner's unique needs. Of course, it's not always easy to tell what those needs actually are. People often hide their feelings behind words or body language, and uncovering them can take some effort. One way to do that is to look for hidden needs in your conversation partner's words. For instance, phrases like "If only I could . . ." or "If it were up to me . . ." might signify a desire, opportunity, or lack of something. Meanwhile, phrases like "I'm doing the best I can" or "I'm going out of my way here" can indicate a plea for recognition. Once you've developed a sense of what your conversation partner needs, do your best to switch modes accordingly. Acknowledge your understanding of your partner's needs and then suggest a potential remedy, like this: "Normally I'd suggest we power through, but it seems like a break would be welcome. Why don't we hit pause for a minute?" In many cases, your conversation partner might want nothing more from you than an empathetic ear. But simply bearing witness to her can be incredibly difficult, because you may feel as though you should be taking action instead of just listening. Sometimes, though, the best thing you can do is watch, wait, and empathize without sharing your own experiences.

Deepen a conversation with connecting questions – and then confirm your understanding.

The author's research on storytelling once brought her to the office of a well-known New York-based newspaper. While there, she interviewed a journalist who couldn't seem to stop multitasking. When the author asked a question, all she got were clipped, efficient responses. The author knew she'd have to dig deep to get more substantive answers. So she asked the journalist a broad question: "What does a good story look like?" The journalist responded, "You just know." Not exactly what the author was looking for. She posed a few more follow-up questions, like "How do you know?" and "What does that feel like?" Finally, the journalist gave her a real response. The questions the author was asking are examples of what she calls connecting questions. They're a great way of deepening a conversation and getting quality information from a conversation partner. The key message in this blink is: Deepen a conversation with connecting questions – and then confirm your understanding. To craft a great connecting question, it's important to frame it neutrally. Each question should be designed to elicit an open response rather than a specific type of reply. Consider, for instance, the question "Do you prefer the first screen or the second screen?" This is not a good connecting question, because it assumes that the person likes at least one of the screens. A better prompt in this case would be "What are your thoughts on the prototype overall?" Often, the best connecting questions start with the words how or what: "How do you feel about that?" "How would you approach . . . ?" or "What would you do if . . . ?" Questions like this don't force a binary yes-or-no answer, and they can result in surprising responses. Be especially careful not to hunt for specific answers to your questions. This can easily lead to two-track conversations, in which you incorrectly assume you and your conversation partner are on the same page. To avoid these, ask yourself how your conversation partner feels about what he's saying, and then summarize aloud what you think you've heard. Treat it like a short executive summary that synthesizes his ideas – for instance, something like, "It seems like you're in high demand and under a lot of stress." Make sure to end your summary with a question, like, "Does that sound right?" This gives your partner a chance to rebut, clarify, or correct your takeaways calmly and respectfully.

Stay flexible, and don't force the conversation in a particular

direction.

“Yes, and” is a well-known technique in improv comedy. It’s used to move scenes forward and encourage collaboration among members of an acting group. Say one person sets up a scene involving a gorilla. Ideally, another member will respond with something like, “Yes, and . . . that gorilla is an excellent singer.” You can see how “yes, and” helps encourage twists, turns, and collaboration. “Yes, and” is also a great principle to keep in mind during everyday conversation. Instead of shutting down a conversation when it heads in an unexpected direction, we can instead use our partner’s ideas as building blocks. Many people go into conversations – especially important ones like job interviews – with a set script they want to follow. But that rigidity can be a barrier to deeper conversation. Here’s the key message: Stay flexible, and don’t force the conversation in a particular direction. There are a couple of guidelines you can use to stay flexible in conversations. One tip is to always be willing to incorporate new information you receive about your partner’s feelings and perspective. If you cling to old information, you risk coming across as stubborn or even out of touch. You should also pay attention to your conversation partner’s responses to monitor whether you’re heading in the right direction. Depending on whether she seems receptive or distracted, engaged or frustrated, you can modify the conversation accordingly. Perhaps counterintuitively, another great way to help a conversation along is by using silence. On one occasion, the author was conducting an interview with a research participant named Edmarc. Without Edmarc’s knowledge, the author and her colleagues observed him as he browsed through an app prototype. Edmarc seemed quite confused by it, but he nevertheless told the author he thought the prototype was “cool” and that he was “into it.” To encourage Edmarc to say what he actually thought, the author simply repeated his words back to him: “So you’re into it.” Edmarc replied “Yep,” with no other comment. And then the author began counting to ten in her head. Most people are uncomfortable with silence and will say anything to fill the dead air before ten seconds are up. Sure enough, the author only managed to get to seven before Edmarc broke the silence with a more honest comment. A brief pause can work wonders for getting a conversation to go where it needs to.

Politely and carefully redirect

conversations that go off-track.

Jordana was polite, chatty, and making it hard for the author to interview her. Despite her friendliness, Jordana seemed set on achieving her own agenda during the conversation – and it was pretty different from the author’s. At one point, for instance, the author tried to ask Jordana a question about her business. But Jordana immediately pivoted to ask whom she could talk to about getting free ad credits. To steer the conversation in the direction she needed it to go, the author redirected. She told Jordana that she could definitely help with getting her the ad credits, but that she wanted to hit pause on that topic for now. She added that Jordana’s work was really interesting to her and that they could come back to ad credits later. After that, the conversation quickly got back on track. The key message is this: Politely and carefully redirect conversations that go off-track. In her pivot, the author made a number of carefully calculated moves. For one, she explicitly addressed the thing Jordana wanted – ad credits – which showed she was listening. She also made sure to tell Jordana she was interested in what she had to say. And, finally, she ensured that Jordana knew she’d get what she wanted a bit later on. Redirecting can help get a conversation back on track, but it can also serve a number of other purposes. One of them is to fend off avoidant behavior. One day, Gabriela, a colleague who reported directly to the author, told her she had an “update.” From experience, the author knew that a junior colleague wanting to give an “update” usually meant he or she was going to resign. But in this case, during their scheduled meeting, Gabriela immediately dove into a discussion about the projects her team was working on and what she was planning for the upcoming week. They were halfway through their allotted time, and the author suspected Gabriela was avoiding the real reason for the meeting. So the author reminded her that she knew there was a specific update Gabriela was hoping to share, and mentioned that they only had 15 minutes remaining. This signpost helped refocus the conversation, and Gabriela finally admitted that she wanted to give the author her two weeks’ notice. Reminders like this can help your conversation partner share something that may be uncomfortable for her. With a gentle prompt, you can give her the final push she needs.

Be aware of the reasons why a

conversation might become uncomfortable.

Ever talked with a native New Yorker? If so, you probably noticed a pretty distinct conversational style. For many New Yorkers, interrupting is often considered a sign of engagement and interest – not rudeness. But that’s certainly not the case in many other parts of the US. Misunderstandings can be all too easy when we speak with people who are different from us in some way. Along with regional differences, for instance, there can also be gender differences in conversation styles: women tend to say “hm-hmm” to acknowledge what another person has said, while men normally use “hm-hmm” as a sign of agreement. It doesn’t matter who you’re talking to – you should always be mindful of your differences and potential areas for misunderstanding. The key message here is: Be aware of the reasons why a conversation might become uncomfortable. Issues can arise in conversations when participants must talk across cultural, gender, hierarchical, or emotional divides. Consider hierarchical relationships, for instance, in which one person is in a position of power and the other is not. In these relationships, it can be difficult for the person without power to be honest because that honesty could potentially be turned against him. What can you do if you find yourself in conversations in which there’s a hierarchy? Well, if you’re the person with more power, be sure to create a safe space for your conversation partner. Show a willingness to be honest, and you’ll encourage others to do the same. On the other hand, if you’re the person with less power, imagine your conversation partner isn’t your boss or teacher but just a fellow human being. Of course, conversations can be difficult for other reasons, too – namely, the particular topics being discussed. When taboo topics like politics, religion, or child-rearing come up in conversation, expect discomfort. Don’t avoid it – instead, lean into the negative feelings. And don’t aim for the conversation to end in agreement among all parties – rather, shoot for mutual understanding. In addition to general taboo topics, you probably have your own individual “hot spot” topics that are challenging for you personally. For instance, if you have a complicated relationship with your mother, the topic of Mother’s Day might be a hot spot. When one of these subjects crops up, have a plan to calm yourself down, perhaps by repeating a soothing mantra or imagining a tranquil vista.

Exit conversations that become too toxic or conflict with your priorities.

Let's face it: many of us have a hard time setting boundaries. But when we fail to exit conversations gracefully or tell people we don't have time right now, our relationships ultimately suffer. There comes a point when, say, a friend calls us one too many times to complain about her partner without asking how we're doing. As a result, we begin to resent her. Or maybe our weekly meetings with a coworker, which always run over, have been causing us to miss our train home – and so we begin to dread working with her. In cases like these, we need to learn how to exit the conversation gracefully and avoid taking on an unnecessary emotional burden. Here's the key message: Exit conversations that become too toxic or conflict with your priorities. Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to exit conversations without coming across as rude or doing permanent damage to your relationships. One technique is called time-boxing. Time-boxing involves setting up a time limit for the conversation up front, before it actually begins. You can do that either verbally or by choosing a location with a built-in time restriction, like a local restaurant that turns tables over quickly. Another way to exit the conversation is by asking for a time-out. This works best when you're speaking with someone with whom you have a close relationship. All it takes is an interjection of a phrase like, "I think I need a breather – I'm noticing how charged this is for me." If you need to end the conversation with someone you don't know quite as well, you can opt to divert it by saying something like, "I'd love to talk more, but I'm really late." Finally, no matter how a conversation ends, it's essential to spend some time recovering afterward. After all, active, empathetic listening requires tons of focus, self-awareness, and engagement, and that can take a toll physically, mentally, and emotionally. To avoid this form of drain – which the author calls listener's drain – do your best to understand and honor your limits. When you've hit your capacity for empathetic listening, schedule time for recovery – whether that's a few quiet hours with a good book, a quality sweat session, or a solid minute of crying. Remember that you'll only retain the strength to listen and care for others when you do the same for yourself.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: It isn't always easy to establish deep, warm connections in our conversations with others. That's because when we listen, we tend to do so on a superficial level, hearing our conversation partner's literal words but missing their underlying meaning. To make others feel heard and understood, we should practice empathetic listening. This requires us to stay present, observe our conversation partner's needs, ask connecting questions, stay flexible – and, sometimes, redirect the conversation when we sense that things are heading the wrong way. Actionable advice: Train your ear. The next time you have a conversation, pay close attention to the unique characteristics of the other person's voice. Try to get a sense of that voice's neutral baseline by paying attention to things like pitch – is the person's voice naturally high or low? – and expressiveness – does the person tend to be more animated, or speak in a monotone? Once you've established the baseline, you'll be able to tell more easily when the person is deviating from it, and why that might be the case. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Listen Like You Mean It as the subject line, and share your thoughts!