# Active – Empathic Listening Scale (AELS)

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# Profile 2

## Active-Empathic Listening Scale

(Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006; also Bodie, 2011)

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## Construct

The Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS) assesses three dimensions of listening: sensing, processing, and responding (Bodie, 2011; Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006).

## Instrument Type

Self-Report; Other-Report; Coder Ratings

## Description

The Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS) is an 11-item, three-factor scale measuring active-empathic listening across three dimensions: sensing ($n = 4$), processing ($n = 3$), and responding ($n = 4$) (Bodie, 2011; Drollinger *et al.*, 2006). *Sensing* describes a listener's ability to understand relational aspects of speech. *Processing* is the cognitive aspect of listening, involves attending to, comprehending, receiving, and interpreting messages. *Responding* measures the behavioral output of listening, including verbal and nonverbal feedback.

## Administration

The AELS can be administered via paper or online. All versions of the scale utilize 7-point scaling (1 = *never or almost never true*, 7 = *always or almost always true*). For the self-report version, participants indicate the extent to which each of 11 statements generally

*Sourcebook of Listening Methodology & Measurement*, First Edition.
Edited by Debra Worthington and Graham Bodie.

applies to them, applies in a particular listening situation, or applied after experiencing a particular listening situation. The other-report version asks respondents to assess the statements with respect to a known other. The scale can also be modified to measure perceptions of AEL within a particular conversation. To do so, the prompt can read "My conversational partner" in the place of "I," making sure that the items are modified for grammar (e.g., change "ask" to "asked" for item 10). Finally, the scale can be used by trained or untrained raters asked to watch videotaped or live conversations. The survey takes fewer than 5 minutes to complete for any version. The wording of the instructions can be changed to cover a wide range of specific contexts (e.g., "think of a salesperson," "think of your physician," or "think of a family member").

## Scoring

The items within subscales are averaged allowing four scores per participant: sensing, processing, responding, and total AEL.

## Development

AEL was originally defined as a form of listening employed by salespeople, where customary active listening is merged with empathy to realize a "higher form of listening" (Comer & Drollinger, 1999; Drollinger *et al.*, 2006, p. 161). The scale was designed to assess effective versus ineffective listening from the points of view of customers. It drew from previous scales developed to measure empathy (Davis, 1980, 1983) and active listening (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). The Drollinger *et al.* (2006) version was called the active-empathetic listening scale.

Items for the original version of the scale were generated from previous practitioner studies as well as from previous listening and empathy measures. Key informants with 10 years of sales experience were interviewed to provide insight into the role of listening in sales. Trained coders were then asked to sort the items into the three categories of sensing, processing, and responding. Items that did not clearly fit into a category were removed. Four studies were conducted to build a validity portfolio for the scale, each time resulting in item removal. In the last study, an exploratory factor analysis revealed the final 11 items.

Bodie (2011) refined and adapted this 11-item scale to a more general social context. The revised scale includes both cognitive and behavioral items; active listening involves not only processing information conveyed by one's conversational partner but also responding to those messages verbally and nonverbally. The scale has since been adapted to measure interlocutor perceptions of AEL after a conversation (Bodie, Jones, Vickery, Hatcher, & Cannava, 2014) as well as to code for AEL from an objective observer's perspective (Bodie & Jones, 2012).

## Reliability

As reported in the studies cited within this profile, the reliability of the subscale scores—sensing ($.73 < \alpha < .85$), processing ($.66 < \alpha < .77$), and responding ($.74 < \alpha < .89$)—displays modest to good evidence of internal consistency. Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, and Vickery

(2013) offered evidence for test–retest reliability for sensing ($r = .77$), processing ($r = .73$), and responding ($r = .79$), as well as the scale as a whole ($r = .70$), providing evidence that the AELS was invariant over a span of 14 to 45 days.

## Validity

Drollinger *et al.* (2006) reported evidence of the original scale's dimensionality through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), $\chi^2$ (41) = 95.11, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .19. They also provided evidence of convergent validity: All three subscales were related to a measure of empathy. Specifically, sensing ($r = .28$), processing ($r = .24$), and responding ($r = .17$) were associated with the Perspective Taking factor of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980, 1983); and sensing ($r = .18$) and processing ($r = .20$) were correlated with Empathic Concern (see Profile 28 for the IRI). Furthermore, the subscales of the AELS were related to a similar measure of active listening (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997): sensing ($r = .44$), processing ($r = .44$), and responding ($r = .57$).

Bodie (2011) provided evidence of construct validity for the more general version of the scale, $\chi^2(41, N = 416) = 119.10, p < .001$, GFI = .95, CFI = .95, RMR = .062, RMSEA = .06, CI 90% = .05, .08. Evidence of convergent validity has also been provided. Bodie (2011) found the AELS associated with a variety of theoretically relevant constructs: perspective taking ($.28 \leq r \leq .44$), empathic responsiveness ($.15 \leq r \leq .18$), sympathetic responsiveness ($.18 \leq r \leq .40$), and Interaction Involvement ($.19 \leq r \leq .67$; see Profile 25 for Interaction Involvement). He concluded that the constructs overlap but are not isomorphic (see Chapter 5 discussion of construct proliferation). Gearhart and Bodie (2011) provided further validity evidence by comparing the AELS to the Social Skills Inventory (SSI) (Riggio, 1986). In general, individuals with higher sensing, processing, and responding scores reported being more skilled in SSI-Emotional Sensitivity and the verbal dimensions of the SSI.

Although the AELS can be used to measure individual tendencies to enact AEL (or perhaps the motivation to do so; see Chapter 5), Bodie *et al.* (2013) reported that responses to AELS items vary as a function of situational prompts. The AELS was found to be time invariant and situationally stable; therefore, it can be used as either a time-invariant trait measure or a socially fluctuating state measure.

Pence and James (2014) offered evidence of construct validity through CFA, $\chi^2(41, N = 162) = 114.65, p < .001$, TLI = .87, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .12, CI 90% = .08, .13. Although the fit statistics were adequate in this report, the error (RMSEA) is somewhat above commonly accepted parameters, perhaps due to lower sample size. Pence and Vickery (2012) also provided evidence of model fit, $\chi^2(41) = 117.19, p < .001$, TLI = .94, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07, CI 90% = .06, .09.

## Availability

The generalized version of the scale is presented here (Bodie, 2011) and is free to use for research purposes with appropriate citation. All other reproduction requires written permission.

## Sample Studies

Researchers have investigated the relationship of AEL to a wide variety of characteristics and in a number of contexts: interpersonal communication (Bodie, 2011), intrapersonal communication (Vickery, Keaton, & Bodie, 2015), supportive communication (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Bodie *et al.*, 2014), sales and marketing (Comer & Drollinger, 1999; Drollinger *et al.*, 2006), personality and emotional intelligence (Pence & Vickery, 2012), and biological sex differences (Pence & James, 2014).

Comer and Drollinger (1999) first conceptualized a model of AEL in regard to salespeople and their relationships with customers. They argued that effective listening includes empathy, and the combination of listening and empathy assists the personal selling process. Drollinger *et al.* (2006) later developed a scale to reflect this conceptual notion, developing the three factors in the process (sensing, processing, and receiving).

Bodie, as noted above, expanded this scale to include general conversational settings. Bodie, Vickery, and Gearhart (2013) found that supportive people and good listeners are described similarly, and supportive listening is best defined as a set of behaviors. Bodie and Jones (2012) used an other-report version of the AELS and reported that AEL is a crucial part of supportive communication: Helpers who utilized more person-centered and immediate support were rated as better listeners, although the effects were small in magnitude. Pence and Vickery (2012) examined AEL in regard to emotional intelligence (EI) and personality, finding that EI predicted each AELS dimension. Furthermore, there was a small, negative association between psychoticism and the AELS subscales. Vickery *et al.* (2015) reported associations between AEL and the attributes and functions of imagined interactions (IIs), a form of mental imagery where an individual imagines conversations with others (Honeycutt, 2010). Those not prone to use IIs for rehearsal and self-understanding, and those likely to use imagined conversations with others to compensate for lack of actual interaction with others, were less likely to report responding actively to a conversational other. Furthermore, those who do not engage in IIs before conversations or imagine a range of possible conversations to gain comprehension were not prone to report engaging in acts that acknowledge conversational partners.

## Critique

As seen above, Bodie's general version of the AELS, although new, exhibits satisfactory evidence of reliability and validity, including temporal validity. However, the subscales are highly correlated, and further evidence is needed to determine whether three factors or just one are necessary to explain relations with other constructs. Because of the high correlations between the three latent factors, many scholars have used a composite score rather than scores for the individual dimensions of sensing, processing, and responding.

In addition, Bodie *et al.* (2014) found that reports of AEL from an individual listener, a conversational partner interacting with that listener, and a rater trained to assess AEL behaviors were not highly correlated—suggesting the perspective from which one views listening behavior influences scores. This finding seems to call into question the method of using self- and other-reported behaviors rather than observation of actual listening when researchers are interested in behaviors. Given that a component of AEL is behavioral—enacted within a particular conversation—and given that participants

may under-, over-, or otherwise misreport their own or others' behaviors, the lack of association suggests that individuals might not be able to discern accurately how they or others generally listen. Consequently, researchers should make an effort to include behavioral data alongside the AELS.

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## Scale

**The Active-Empathic Listening Scale (Bodie, 2011)**

*Source*: Bodie (2011). Reproduced with permission of Taylor & Francis.

**AELS: Self-Report Version**

Instructions: Please indicate how frequently you perceive these statements to be true about yourself, using the following scale:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Never or Almost never true* | | | | | | *Always or Almost always true* |

Sensing

1) I am sensitive to what others are not saying.
2) I am aware of what others imply but do not say.
3) I understand how others feel.
4) I listen for more than just the spoken words.

Processing

5) I assure others that I will remember what they say.
6) I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.
7) I keep track of points others make.

Responding

8) I assure others that I am listening by using verbal acknowledgements.
9) I assure others that I am receptive to their ideas.
10) I ask questions that show my understanding of others' positions.
11) I show others that I am listening by my body language (e.g., head nods).

*Note*: Other versions can be created by changing "I" to some other prompt such as "My friend" or "My conversational partner" and then adjusting the verb tense (e.g., change "I assure" to "My friend assures"). Items are specified to load on the three latent constructs of sensing, processing, and responding and should be randomized prior to administration. Researchers investigating situational listening should supply a context. Scores should be tested for adherence to model parameters prior to further statistical analysis. Labels should be removed and items randomized prior to administration.