

Information Sheet

Effective Listening

What is Effective Listening?

Effective listening involves giving full and interested attention to the speaker communicating with you.

Clear communication comprises both effective listening and assertive communication (please see *Approach Info* sheet on Assertive Communication).

Benefits of Effective Listening

There are a number of potential benefits to employing effective listening skills, including: 1) gaining a clearer understanding of what is being communicated to you and the experience of the other person; 2) the opportunity to convey empathy and compassion to the other person; 3) a reduced likelihood that the other person will react defensively to your response; 4) improved conflict resolution; 5) minimising misunderstandings and 6) developing stronger interpersonal relationships.

Steps in Effective Listening

1. Listen carefully to the content of the message (words spoken) and notice the non-verbal behaviour (body language) of the speaker; also try to determine the speaker's emotion;
2. Repeat back to the speaker what you have heard and your understanding of their experience, without commenting on your own opinion or response to what they have said, even if you do not agree with them;
3. Check that the message you have received is consistent with what they were seeking to convey and, if unsure, ask questions to clarify your understanding of what is being communicated using open (what, how, when, where, who) questions;
4. The role of the listener at this point is to try to understand the message and experience of the speaker, and to communicate empathy and compassion as appropriate;
5. Once the speaker's original message is clearly understood, the listener has the opportunity to

take the role of speaker, convey their opinion and respond to what they have heard.

Barriers to Effective Listening

There are a number of common listening behaviours that may reduce the understanding gained by the listener, increase the likelihood of defensive responding by the speaker, or escalate conflict. These include:

- *Comparing*: comparison of aspects of your own experience with that of the speaker;
- *'Mind Reading'*: making assumptions about what the speaker is thinking and feeling;
- *Rehearsing*: planning what you are going to say next as the speaker is talking;
- *Filtering*: paying attention to some, but not other, aspects of what the speaker is saying;
- *Judging*: making negative appraisals about the speaker or the message before hearing it fully;
- *Daydreaming*: only half listening to the conversation;
- *Identifying*: relating everything the speaker is saying back to your own experience and conveying this immediately;
- *Advising*: telling the speaker how they should resolve their problems before fully understanding;
- *Sparring*: delivering putdowns or minimising the impact of what the speaker is saying;
- *Being right*: doing whatever it takes to avoid being wrong or to accept criticism;
- *Derailing*: changing the topic of conversation or making jokes when feeling bored or uncomfortable;
- *Placating*: agreeing with everything the speaker says without fully listening.

For many, these skills have not been part of early childhood or later learning experiences. As when learning any new skill, repeated practise promotes awareness of unhelpful listening behaviours and increases use of effective listening skills.