

Listening is Not a Spectator Sport - Rules for Active Listening Part 2 of our 3-part Couples Communication Series

Communication between individuals can be a powerful tool.

On one hand it can nurture positive feelings of love, admiration and respect. On the other hand though, it can create negative emotions such as hurt feelings or anger. Learning an effective way to communicate will help prevent conflict from damaging your relationship. The rules below are meant to give you additional tools to help your communication as a couple. Remember, good communication will require the two of you to both contribute equally. Without both of you fully contributing, you can decrease the likelihood of having quality communication.

It is important to note that being the listener doesn't mean you get an excuse to sit back and do nothing. Listening, though a silent act, is still an active part of communication. In short, listening is not a spectator sport! How you listen, is as important as how you

speak and being an active listener communicates to the speaker that you understand the issue they raise.¹ You do not have to agree with the speaker's point of view but you do owe them the courtesy of listening. It can be difficult to wait for the speaker to finish talking, but by demonstrating listening skills, you can calm a tense situation and begin to introduce forgiveness, compromise and most importantly—an end to conflict!

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Let's get started with some of the tools you'll need to become an active listener.



Rules for Active Listening

Active Listening Rule #1: Listen²

This rule is pretty straight forward but is also often easier said than done. You must be prepared to actively listen to what is being said. This means that you aren't talking or planning a response to what your partner is saying. Active listening conveys that you've understood what the speaker is saying.

¹ *We Can Work it Out: How to Solve Conflicts, Save Your Marriage and Strengthen Your Love for Each Other*, Clifford Notarius, Ph.D., & Howard Markman, Ph.D. Penguin Putnam Inc, New York, NY, 1994.

² *Ibid*, p 231.

Body language can also communicate either positive or negative things to the speaker. Make sure your body language signals that you are listening intently to your partner. Some types of body language that can signal that you are not listening are behaviors such as rolling your eyes, appearing distracted or bored or fidgeting. An active listener focuses their attention on the speaker; this may require that you look beyond the words or tone in order to uncover the true essence of their message. As you prepare to communicate, determine whether sitting face-to-face, or side-by-side, is the best way to indicate that you are listening.

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Replay in your own words what you believe the speaker tried to communicate.

Active Listening Rule #2: Stop, Pause, Replay

After the speaker has communicated their point, pause to reflect on what has been said. Replay in your own words what you believe the speaker tried to communicate.

Restating in your words what the speaker said achieves two things:

1. It lets the speaker know that their communication has been received in the way they intended
2. It also lets the speaker know that you've understood what they communicated

Active Listening Rule #3: Replay, Not Re-Butt³

As tempting as it can be to use your replay moment [see Rule #2 above] as an opportunity to further state your point or voice a disagreement, doing so is actually counter-productive to the idea of communicating as a couple. It places one person's opinion against the other's. The typical outcome is that one person feels like they won the argument. This can occur because the other person appears to have given up on continuing the conversation. Stick to using your words to describe what the speaker has said to you. Use your turn as the speaker to share your opinion or perception of an issue—you'll appreciate the active listening on the other end.

Stick to using your words to describe what the speaker has said to you.

Active Listening Rule #4: The Art of Understanding⁴

Conveying that you understand what has been communicated, shows your partner that you are paying attention and are invested emotionally in the process. It produces a feeling of validation for your partner.

³ *Fighting For Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*, Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, Susan Blumberg. Jossey-Boss Publishers, San Francisco, CA, 1994.

⁴ *We Can Work it Out*, p 231.

Keep the give and take of communication functional.

Showing that you understand their message also communicates that sharing sensitive thoughts and feelings with you can be done without fear of criticism or attack. Keep the give and take of communication

functional. Being an attentive listener means that you have understood what your partner has said. It does not however necessarily indicate that you agree with what they said. If your feeling or point of view on an issue is different, wait until you are the speaker before sharing your perspective.

Like learning any new skill, practicing and incorporating these “rules” may seem silly or unnatural at first. It is important to practice these communication skills while having less challenging discussions so you will be able to use them during times of conflict.

Marriage education experts agree that most couples will have some degree of conflict during their marriage. Research shows that one of the keys to a happy marriage is to learn to handle conflict with good communication skills.

Want to know or do more? Check out these resources:

To Read:

- *12 Hours to a Great Marriage: A Step-by-Step Guide for making Love Last.* Howard Markman, Scott M. Stanley, Susan L. Blumberg, Natalie H. Jenkins and Carol Whiteley. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2004.
- *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate,* Gary Chapman. Northfield Publishing, Chicago, 1995.
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.* John Gottman, Ph.D., and Nan Silver. Crown Publishers, New York, NY, 1999.

To Do:

- Attend a marriage enrichment class, find one in your area by visiting: <http://www.smartmarriages.com/app/Directory.Home>