

Being a good listener is an important skill in any relationship, whether at work or at home. Therapists, counsellors and interviewers learn and practice these skills of attending, following and reflecting. Examine these skills and practice the ones that you are poorest at.

■ Attending skills

A posture of involvement

Incline your body towards speaker – facing squarely – open posture – appropriate distance.

Appropriate body motion

Moving in a synchronised way with the speaker, not to distract, not rigid and unmoving.

Eye contact

With face and other parts of body – not staring, not avoiding.

Non-distracting environment

No distractors – remove sizeable physical barriers.

■ Following skills

Door openers

Non-coercive invitations to talk – a description of the other person's body language – 'Care to talk about it?' Silence – attending.

Minimal encouragers

'Mm-hmmm . . . really . . . right . . . oh!', head nodding.

Infrequent questions

Open questions, eg, 'How did that make you feel?', rather than, 'Do you like him?'; ask only one question at a time.

Attentive silence

Offers personal space to think, feel and express.

■ Reflecting skills

Paraphrasing

A concise response stating the essence of the other's content in the listener's own words.

Reflecting feelings

Mirroring back to the speaker, in succinct statements, the emotions they are communicating – focus on feeling words – observe body language. Ask yourself how you would feel in that situation. 'You look pretty upset.' 'Sounds like you're really angry.'

Reflecting meaning

Linking the speaker's feelings to facts to provide meaning. 'You feel angry because of "a", "b" and "c" . . .'

Summarising

Brief restatement of the main themes and feelings the speaker expressed over a long conversation.

(Adapted from **Bolton**, 1986)