

Are You Listening?

You've probably heard it said that listening is the most difficult of all communication skills. There must be something to this, because not being listened to is the number one thing people complain about in their relationships.

I think one reason listening can be tough is we're such an action-oriented people. We spend our days doing, solving, implementing. We kind of feel at loose ends if we're "just listening." How do I know if I'm being helpful or not? When is it good to speak?

Here are some tips to bring "just listening" into clearer focus. When your partner is upset with you, has had a hard day, or just has something important on her mind, these ideas can really bring you closer together.

- 1. Listen 3 times more than you talk.** At some point, you'll probably see your partner draw a deep breath and relax. That tells you she's getting what she needs.
- 2. Listen for the primary concern.** This might take some time. The primary concern might be buried under other concerns and it might take you awhile to uncover it.
- 3. Keep listening even after she's done.** Normally, a conversation goes like this. I'm listening. When the other person finishes a sentence and pauses, I figure he's done. And that means what? It's my turn. (Finally!) But see what happens if you keep listening. Often that's the moment when your partner will tell you her primary concern. At the beginning, she'll talk about things that are less important. She's testing the waters. Then, if she senses that you're really listening, she'll tell you the heart of the matter. She may not even realize what the heart of the matter IS until just that moment, especially if she's upset. Have you ever noticed that when you're upset you don't always know why? Neither does your partner. Listening even when she pauses gives her the support she needs to discover it.
- 4. Summarize her primary concern.** This will make her feel even more understood and of course, it will let you know whether you do understand or not. Then, if there's a problem to be solved, you'll know that you're solving the right problem! For example: Your partner says: I've been trying to get my boss to discuss this project for a week. You say: You're frustrated because you can't get input from your boss on what you're supposed to be doing.

Now your partner feels relaxed and supported. She feels that you understand what's going on with her. And maybe she even understands it better herself, which is always comforting. You're well on your way to a cozy evening together. Not only that, now she'll be more interested in what you have to say!

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