

Reflective or Active Listening

Reflective listening is a valuable technique for understanding, processing, and responding to what is being said. Maintaining good communication habits takes a bit of effort and practice, as we tend toward listening to respond, versus listening to understand. Listening to understand is far more important and helps with problem-solving, builds trust, increases empathy, and seems to help reduce conflict over time.

- Use of encouragers – use short words and signals to signal listening and engagements e.g., nodding the head, words like ‘yes’ ‘no’ ‘Uh-huh.’
- Open body language – to communicate openness, that the client is safe, and readiness to listen, sit with arms unfolded facing the client in an open posture.
- Repeat back – repeating some of the keywords back to the client to prompt for more.
- Summarizing – sum up, using your own words, the main ideas behind what has been spoken about.
- Paraphrasing – repeating back the last thought or few thoughts back to the speaker using your own words.
- Mirror the speaker – to a sensible degree, and to make them feel at ease, adopt the speaker’s body language, language, and voice tone.
- Reflection – pay attention to the speaker’s mood or feelings, and feed your interpretation back to them.
- Balance silence with questioning skills – allow time for the client to think about what they are going to say, use appropriate questions if needed to help the client open up.

“Golden Rules of Communication”

1. Seek to understand before seeking to be understood
2. Be non-judgmental
3. Give the speaker your undivided attention
4. Use silence effectively

Suggested practice for couples: Make an “appointment” with each other a few times a week to start, where you each have between 10-15 minutes to speak while the other partner listens. As the speaker, focus on talking about your feelings and things happening that are important to you. Focus on noticing if you are being critical or complaining frequently. If so, try to share what you want (ie. Turn your complaints into requests or “asks”). As the listener, practice reflecting back to your partner what they are saying, using all of the reflective listening skills noted above. Take your partner at face value when they offer a correction, in that you should never get into an argument when they do not confirm an accurate reflection. Just focus on reflecting back to them something that they agree they are actually communicating to you, the way they hope you will hear it. Have fun, and Good Luck!