

CONCERN[®] Services

We're More Than An EAP . . .

Our goal is to Help People Live Better & Help People Work Better. The following information from the **CONCERN WorkLife Services** program is intended to help you accomplish that goal and remind you that, as your Employee Assistance Program, we are here for you and your family. Visit us on-line at www.ak.concernservices.com or call (513) 891-1627 / (800) 841-5002 for no-charge, confidential assistance.

Learning to Listen

Communication with your partner involves talking, but listening is equally as important. *Listening* is more than just *hearing*. While hearing is the process of transmitting sound waves to the brain, listening is a complex procedure of interpreting and understanding what is actually heard.

Active Listening

Active listening is one of the best ways to express interest and care for another person. You have to be willing to listen to your partner's point of view and try to understand it.

However, that does not mean you have to agree. It just means that you have to try hard to understand and identify with your mate's feelings. It may be as simple as saying, "Yes," or "I see," or nodding your head. Notice the mouth and eyebrows of your partner. What message is being sent through facial expressions?

Think about your own body language. What message are you sending? Are you fidgeting? Are you rolling your eyes? Are you smiling sarcastically? Are you sending a message that you are truly listening to the reasons being given by your mate?

You may not like what your partner has to say, but to actively listen, you as the listener must try to understand what the speaker is saying. Next, repeat back to the speaker your understanding of what was said to see if you interpreted it correctly. This is called *paraphrasing*.

The listener does not attempt to change or add to the meaning of the message. The speaker is given the first opportunity to speak freely, and the focus should remain on the content of his or her message. The listener does not voice an opinion at this point—sometimes this is not easy if it is an extremely difficult issue. The key is to show the speaker that you are earnestly listening.

If the listener has not understood the speaker's meaning, the speaker can explain further. The listener again reflects back (paraphrases) what the speaker said, and repeats the process until the message sent is the message received. When these two messages agree, the roles are reversed. The speaker becomes the listener, and the listener becomes the speaker.

An effective paraphrase

- Is brief
- Reflects only the most important parts of the speaker's message
- Focuses on the content of the message
- Does not challenge the speaker's message

Examples

Read the following examples to understand the difference between *hearing without listening* and *active listening*.

Hearing Without Listening

Wife: "I sure am tired tonight."

Husband: "You can rest tomorrow since it is Saturday."

Wife: "It would be nice to rest tonight."

Husband: "After we get home from the movie you can rest."

The husband is not listening to what his wife was saying. He was not trying to understand what his wife really meant.

Active Listening

Wife: "I sure am tired tonight."

Husband: "Sounds like you would rather stay home than go out tonight."

Wife: "Yes, that is right. Do you mind?"

Husband: "No. That is fine with me. How about renting a movie and watching it at home?"

The husband repeated the message back to his wife to make sure he understood what she was really saying before responding. This type of communication enriches a relationship. Both partners understand each other and believe that what they are saying is being understood. In other words, the message being sent is the message being received.

Unfortunately, this communication style is not normal in everyday conversation. Active listening skills are most importantly used when difficult issues must be dealt with. These skills provide the involved parties a safer way to communicate.

Ground Rules

Couples often find that a predictable structure for communicating is very helpful when there is a disagreement. It might be beneficial to establish a set of ground rules (which are agreeable to both partners) before the discussion has gone too far.

Sample Rules

- Speaker will give genuine thoughts, feelings, and concerns.
- Speaker will use "I..." statements, not "You..." statements.
- Speaker will state short messages and then allow the listener to paraphrase.
- Listener will paraphrase and repeat the paraphrasing until the message is the same as what the speaker intended.
- Listener will focus on the speaker's message.
- Listener will not interrupt.
- Listener will not offer his or her own opinion or thoughts at this time.
- Both partners will get a chance to be the speaker and the listener.

Using these communication skills shows a commitment to the relationship. You are giving the unspoken message to each other that you care about the quality of your interaction. Now it is time to practice!