

ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening is powerful in two ways: it helps the listener build rapport and influence situations, and it makes the speaker feel heard. In my therapy training, when I asked clients what helped them most, they replied, “Being listened to.” Research shows the quality of the relationship between therapist and client, grounded in good listening, matters more than any specific tool.

Despite hearing from birth, effective listening is difficult. In negotiations, I saw how often situations escalated because people felt unheard. Negotiating isn’t about talking—it’s about listening.

Why Listening Is Hard

Most of us listen passively, treating it as background noise while multitasking. Active listening requires conscious effort, but the good news is, there are techniques to help. I use the mnemonic PROMISES:

- Paraphrasing
- Reflecting/Mirroring
- Open questions
- Minimal encouragers
- I...when...because statements
- Summarising
- Emotional labelling
- Silence

The Techniques

Paraphrasing

Repeat what someone said using your own words to show you’ve heard and understood.

SPEAKER: *“I have to get up at 5 in the morning but I can’t sleep because my neighbour is playing his TV so loudly.”*

LISTENER: *“Let me see if I’ve got this straight - and please correct me if I haven’t. You have an early start in the morning and the noise coming from your neighbour is keeping you up.”*

Reflecting/Mirroring

Mirroring matches emotion and guides to calmness; reflecting echoes key words.

SPEAKER: *"I was annoyed I didn't get that post I put in for. I felt it was really unfair."*

LISTENER: *"Unfair?"*

SPEAKER: *"Yeah, I think they had made up their minds before I went in."*

Open Questions

Encourage detailed responses using Who, What, Where, When, Why, How.

OPEN QUESTION

What's your view on that?

Who did what?

Why did you do that?

Where did this happen?

When did they do that?

How do you like your coffee?

CLOSED QUESTION

Do you like that?

Did he punch her?

Was that a good idea?

Did that happen over there?

So that happened at midday?

Milk in your coffee?

Minimal Encouragers

Gestures or sounds like 'Uh huh' or nods show attentiveness.

I...When...Because Statements

Clarify how someone's actions affect you without assigning blame.

"I find it hard to help..."

***when** people shout...*

***because** I might miss something important to them."*

Summarising

Overview of events to ensure mutual understanding, often at the start of a conversation or after a pause.

Emotional Labelling

Name the emotions you observe to show understanding and build rapport.

Silence

Used well, silence prompts people to reveal key concerns.

Choosing the Right Technique

TECHNIQUE	WHEN TO USE IT
Paraphrasing	To check understanding and show the person is heard
Reflecting/Mirroring	During heightened emotions or responding to 'energy' words
Open Questions	When more information is needed
Minimal Encouragers	To keep a person talking
I...When...Because Statements	To raise awareness of how someone's behaviour impacts on you
Summarising	At the start of a conversation, or during pauses, or when you need 'thinking time'
Emotional Labelling	When emotions are displayed or change
Silence	To create space for the person to speak

Final Thoughts

Listening isn't about problem-solving. Often, people don't want solutions—they want someone to listen without judgment. True listening builds trust and allows others to process emotions.

SUMMARY - P.R.O.M.I.S.E.S.

Paraphrasing: Rephrase what you've heard

Reflecting/Mirroring: Echo words or match emotions

Open Questions: Encourage fuller answers

Minimal Encouragers: Small verbal or non-verbal cues

I...When...Because Statements: Show how behaviour affects others

Silence: Let them speak by holding space

Emotional Labelling: Name their emotions

Summarising: Recap to clarify understanding