

Become a Better Listener by Using the Listening Cycle

Objective

To use the Listening Cycle tool to enhance your listening skills.

What to Know

Have you ever been talking to someone, and you were sure the person didn't hear a word you said? Or do you frequently find your mind wandering when people talk to you? Did you know the average person listens for three seconds before they start thinking about what they want to say next? Researchers outlined an effective research-based process for practicing listening, and it is called the Listening Cycle.

1. Attend. Pay attention to nonverbal cues, including making eye contact, facing the speaker, and avoiding distractions and doing tasks.

2. Acknowledge. Validate the speaker by saying things like, "This problem sounds serious," or, "That sounds very difficult. I'm so sorry that happened to you." Acknowledging others' experiences ensures they know you're listening and that you care.

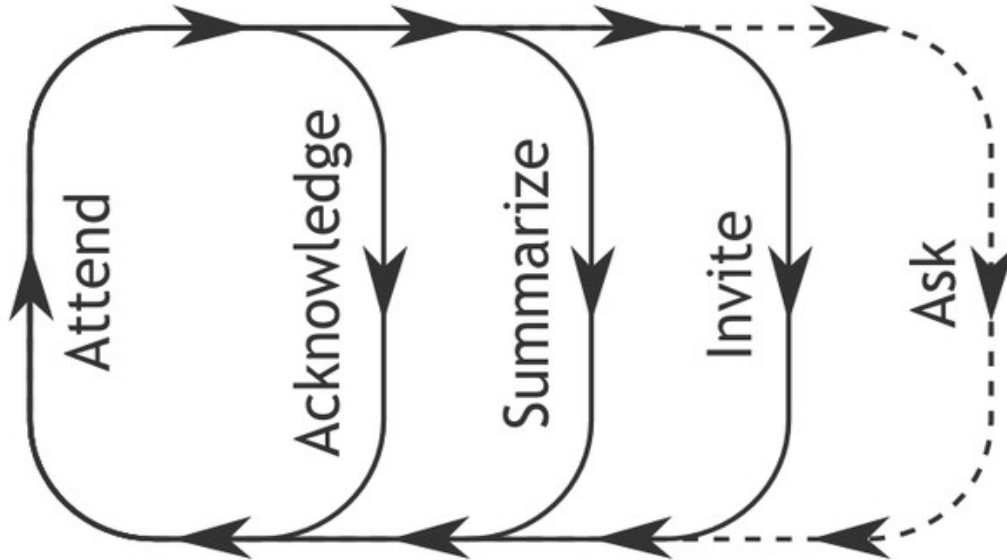
3. Summarize. This indicates you understand what the person is trying to tell you. When summarizing, avoid interrupting, but insert your comments during a natural break in the conversation. You might say, "What I hear you saying is that you _____, did I get that right?" Summarizing is essential for understanding, and if you misinterpret the message, you're giving the speaker the chance to correct you or add information.

4. Invite. If you want to hear more, you can ask for additional information. You might say, "Can you say more about that?" or, "Can you please clarify what you just said?" This step allows you to gain a better understanding of what was said.

5. Ask. If you are confused, ask a question without interrupting. You might say, "Do you mind if I ask a question?" This step helps clear up any confusion. Allow the speaker to fully explain so you understand before you begin to speak.

Listening Cycle suggestions:

- The speaker has the floor, so the listener should not cut off the speaker or finish sentences
- Share the floor by taking turns speaking
- Avoid giving unsolicited advice or problem-solving
- Speaker should use "I" statements as much as possible
- Share feelings openly without putting each other down
- Be specific and brief about perceptions and feelings
- Make "you" statements when summarizing what you heard the speaker say
- Instead of refuting by citing evidence or arguing, paraphrase what the speaker said
- Focus on the speaker's message



What to Do

With a coach, counselor, or friend, use the Listening Cycle to deliberately practice listening attentively and obtaining information. Answer the following questions once you complete each step.

1. Attend. During this step, give your full attention to the speaker. **Look, Listen, Track** – listen closely and check for congruency in words, tone, facial expressions, and body language. Make eye contact and be fully present.

Did you have a difficult time attending to the speaker? Why or why not?

Did you find yourself mentally rehearsing what you wanted to say? _____

What did you do to redirect yourself? _____

What nonverbal cues did you notice?

Was it hard for you to be fully present? Explain.

2. Acknowledge. You can do this by nodding, saying, "uh-huh" or other brief interpretive statements or exclamations. Paraphrase, especially focusing on feelings and wants. Avoid saying, "I understand."

Did you have an easy time acknowledging the speaker? Why or why not?

Did you evaluate or judge what the other person was saying? Explain.

Did the speaker know you were listening and that you cared about what they said? Explain.

3. Summarize. Demonstrate that you understand by accurately summarizing what the speaker said. Avoid giving opinions or asking "why" questions because they aren't helpful – the speaker might then repeat something that leads them to think you weren't paying attention.

Did you interrupt or cut off the speaker? _____

Did you avoid "why" questions? _____

Did you give your opinion? _____

After summarizing, did you understand what the speaker was trying to say? Why or why not?

Was it difficult for you to summarize what was said? Why or why not?

Did the speaker correct you? _____

4. Invite more information to ensure you have the whole picture. This is a step beyond merely acknowledging what the speaker said. Ask open-ended questions, or say:

- Am I getting it?
- Tell me more about...
- Is there anything more you'd like me to know?
- What else can you add to that?

Describe how this step in the process went for you.

5. Ask. Use questions sparingly and only for clarification. Begin with who, what, when, where, or how [remember – avoid “why” questions]:

- I notice you’re frowning. What's going on?
- What do you think is going on?
- How do you feel right now?
- What do you want?

Describe how this step in the process went for you.

At any time during the process was there a “breakdown” in communication? What happened?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did using the Listening Cycle help you become a better listener? Why or why not?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

The Listening Cycle Diagram was developed by Sherod Miller, Phyllis Miller, Elam W. Nunnally, and Daniel B. Wackman. (1991). Talking and Listening Together: Couple Communication. Littleton, CO: Interpersonal Communication Programs.