

Seven Steps to Being a Better Listener

As discussed in the Focus on the Family broadcast *Can We Talk? Communication Advice for Husbands and Wives* with Dr. David Clarke. These steps are written for husbands—but wives, you can apply them too!

Step One: No distractions

Believe me, it will take all your powers of concentration to listen to your woman. She can do two or more things at a time. You can't.

You can't allow any distractions. None. No television. No radio. No smartphone. No electronic device of any kind. No kids. No pets. No music. No squeaky chairs. No reading materials. No other activities.

Just you and her in a private, quiet place. (More on this in the next chapter.)

Step Two: Maintain Eye Contact and Attentive Body Language

Women are really into eye contact. Your woman expects and needs you to look into her beautiful eyes when she is talking. For her, eye contact is a part of connecting. Also, don't fold your arms across your chest or turn away from her in the slightest way. Always face her in an open, relaxed manner.

Step Three: Reflect Content and Emotion

Do not—I repeat—do not listen to her in silence. You could actually be understanding everything she says, but it won't make any difference if you stare, saying nothing. She'll think you're not listening and she'll follow this chain reaction: she'll talk more and repeat herself, she'll get frustrated, she'll get angry, and she'll feel hurt. All bad, obviously.

She needs to know you are listening, and she needs ongoing, periodic responses to what she is saying. When you reflect, that is, “cast back” to her what she is saying, you get both of these jobs done.

As she talks, you feed back to her some of her key words and phrases that will communicate understanding of what she is saying (content) and what she is feeling about what she is saying (emotions). You don't repeat everything she says, just say back enough to let her know you “get” what she's saying and feeling. Here are a few examples.

“Waiting an hour at the doctor's office? I don't blame you for being mad.”

“Your friend Mary insulted you? I know that hurt you.”

“No raise again? Incredibly frustrating and discouraging.”

If you are not accurate in reflecting back her thoughts and feelings, she will correct you. That's fine. Let her do it. In addition to building understanding, reflection is a great way for you to maintain your focus in the conversation.

Step Four: Ask Questions

Good listeners ask questions. And your woman loves questions. She's always asking questions, isn't she? When you're talking to her, it's the Spanish Inquisition! So, return the favor when she's talking.

“How do you feel about that?”

“What do you think your friend will do now?”

“What type of dog was it?”

“Who else was at the meeting?”

“What did you have for lunch?”

Questions show that you're interested and trying to get a full picture of the experience she's talking about.

Step Five: React Emotionally

Okay, this will be the hardest one to do. As a Clam, you are not known for your emotional reactions. You almost always have a logical reaction to what she is saying. But what your woman needs is your *emotional* reaction to what she is saying.

So, keep your logical reactions to yourself, and try to feel a piece of what she is feeling. Reflecting her emotion, saying back to her what she is saying she is feeling is good, but *feeling* some of it is better. Try hard to walk in her shoes, and imagine how you would feel if you experienced what she has experienced.

This is called *mirroring* her emotion. If she's angry, you're angry. If she's sad and hurt, you're sad and hurt. If she's happy and excited, so are you. You will never feel 100 percent of her emotion, but you can get to 10 or 20 percent.

Another avenue here is feeling your own emotional reaction to what she is saying. That's okay, too, and she will appreciate your response. For example, she may be sad in telling you about a family member who rejected her. You can reflect her sadness, but also share that you are angry at the family member for treating her badly.

Step Six: Allow Yourself to Be Called Out

Despite your best efforts, there will be times when you do not listen well. Or, for whatever reason, *your woman thinks you are not listening well*. Give her blanket permission—in every conversation—to inform you when she senses you are not listening.

Believe her when she calls you out. Don't get defensive. Don't try to convince her that you were listening intently. Accept her opinion, and say, "I'm sorry. What was I doing that made you think I wasn't listening?" She'll tell you, and you can prove you were listening despite your signals to the contrary. Or, if you truly weren't listening, admit that and apologize, then ask her to say it again.

Step Seven: Ask Her If She Thinks You're Listening

As you begin this process of learning, ask her this question at least once in every significant conversation: "Do you think I'm listening well?" This shows her that you are making a real effort. She will like that.

If she says yes, that's great, and you just move ahead in the conversation. If she says no, ask her what you were doing to convey the impression that you were not listening. Accept what she says, apologize, and make the corrections. If you were really listening, your behavior still made her think you weren't. So, you will work to eliminate those non-listening triggers.

I also recommend that you sit down in a private place and ask your woman to describe your behaviors that make her feel you are not listening. Get from her a list of specific behaviors, then work hard to correct them.

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