

# Tips for Effective Communication

## [Empathic Listening](#)

**Empathic listening** is a method of communicating that you understand, care, and are willing to listen to another person's experiences, feelings, and concerns. In short, it is an effective way that a listener can communicate empathy for the speaker. Empathic listening underlies many evidence based therapies such as Motivational Interviewing and CRAFT. It can make you a more effective communicator, particularly in roles where you are trying to help another person (e.g., peer counselor).

**Empathic listening** requires that the listener pay close attention to what the speaker is **saying** and **feeling** and to **convey understanding of the speaker's experience**. It does **NOT** involve advice giving, problem solving, or judging the speaker.

### **The Do's of Empathic Listening:**

- **Make eye contact** with the person (at a level that is comfortable for the speaker).
- Show that you are **interested** (e.g., nodding, saying "yes" or "uh-huh").
- **Give your full attention** to the speaker (e.g., turn off cell phones or set them aside, turn toward the speaker).
- Listen for the **key experiences** of the speaker.
- Listen for the **key emotions** of the speaker.
- Ask **open-ended questions**: questions that cannot be answered by "yes" or "no" (i.e., close-ended questions).
  - Instead of asking, "Did your boss send you here to meet with me?" Ask, "What brought you in to see me today?"
  - Open-ended questions invite the speaker to share his/her experiences and emotions.
  - They indicate care and concern for the speaker.
  - Questions that begin with "How," "What," "Would."
- **Limit close-ended questions and asking many questions in a row** (you are inviting the speaker to share his/her experiences not interrogating him/her to get information).
- **Listen more** than you talk.
- **Restate or summarize** key experiences and key emotions. Check to see if your understanding of the speaker's experience is accurate ("What I am hearing you say is...Does that fit for you?").
- **Limit interruptions**. Wait for the speaker to pause. Don't talk over the speaker.
- Be **curious** about what is **not being said**.

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[Terry, Christine M.](#) (2017). Additional resources for the talk titled More than Al-Anon and Nar-Anon: Therapeutic approaches and techniques to help families of loved ones with addictions. Presented to WSPA Fall Convention, November 3, 2017.

- **Use your feelings as a guide** to what the speaker may be feeling. Be sure to check it out with the speaker (“I notice I’m beginning to feel anxious. I’m wondering if you feel anxious too?”)
- **Limit advice giving or problem solving** unless directly asked to do so by the speaker. Even when asked, be sure to check-in with the speaker that you understand the problem from the speaker’s perspective and that the speaker understands the solution you are offering.

## Additional Effective Communication Skills

Empathic listening forms the foundation of effective communication. The following communication skills can be used with empathic listening to increase understanding, reduce or avoid misunderstandings, and skillfully navigate conflict or to talk about difficult topics (e.g., addiction).

### **Advance Level Communication Skills That Everyone Can Learn:**

- **Be Brief.**
  - Too much information leads to confusion for the listener. Limit communication to the main idea, request, or question.
- **Be Specific.**
  - Refer to specific behaviors. Even better if the behaviors are observable, measurable, and reinforceable.
  - Example: “Your colleagues are concerned about your professional behavior” vs. “We are concerned that you’ve shown up late to the last few meetings.”
- **Be Positive.**
  - Choose words that are positive, complimentary, inclusive, and hopeful.
  - Use a tone of voice that sounds caring, patient, and matter-of-fact.
  - Frame communication in ways that are descriptive, specific, and neutral.
    - Example: “You need to admit that you have a problem and are an alcoholic” vs. “From my perspective it looks like drinking may be related to being late to meetings. Let’s see if we can find some ways to help with your drinking so it doesn’t impact your attendance at meetings.”
- **Offer Understanding Statements.**
  - Recognize and communicate a part of the speaker’s situation, emotions, actions, or reactions.
  - Understanding does NOT equal agreement with the speaker’s actions or situation.
  - Use empathic listening skills to convey understanding.
- **Label your Emotions.**
  - Can help elicit empathy and willingness.
  - Be brief, descriptive, non-accusatory, calm, and try not to exaggerate.
  - For example, “You’re always late. You are so inconsiderate.” vs. “I feel irritated when you arrive late to an important meeting.”
- **Accept Partial Responsibility.**

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- This is a skill that can be very helpful in resolving conflict. Sharing a problem can decrease defensiveness and increase willingness to work together to solve a problem.
- It does not mean taking the blame or admitting fault. It is a way of communicating openness and willingness. It says, “We are a team and can work on this together.”
- Examples of communicating partial responsibility:
  - “I forgot to remind you...”
  - “I sometimes overreact...”
  - “I am not always the best communicator...”
  - “I should have been more clear...”
- **Offer to Help.**
  - When phrased as a question, it can convey support in a non-judgmental manner.
  - If you don’t know how to help, ask “How can I help?”
  - Only offer help that you are actually willing to do.