

Listen Up!

Stop talking to yourself with these suggestions to enhance listening from Caryn Hacker-Buechel.

"...and then the washer started leaking and I called the plumber. He came right away, so I was still able to pick the kids up from school. So it all turned out OK in the end."

"...all OK in the end."

"And your mother called. She said she's got a doctor's appointment this week, but she isn't expecting anything but good news."

"Hmmm. Good news."

Every woman's been there at one time or another. Happily chattering away about our day or this or that and the person we are talking to blankly repeats only the last few words we said, in a robot-like monotone, and really hasn't heard a word said over the TV, or the computer game, or their own pressing thoughts. Yes, we've all been there.

This exchange usually, although not exclusively, occurs with a spouse or

off-spring, but rarely with a girlfriend or even another adult female. Typically, women converse in a comfortable circular flow of words that eventually meanders to the point. Like enjoying the natural pace of a verbose river, we don't feel the need to rush or stifle our use of extensive verbiage. We will calmly wait while our girlfriends "get to the point." This art of conversationalism is very gender-specific. Most women possess

it, and most men do not, along with the true ability to comfort members of our own sex when they are upset. "Suck it up man" just doesn't work for us. We use words as symbolic offerings to express everything from comprehension to communication; from affection to admiration; and from dramatic representation to dogmatic explanation.

However, the natural ability to use a multitude of words does not necessarily make for good verbal interactions. In most cases, it comes down to developing great listening skills in addition to conversational talent. I therefore offer, to both sexes, the following five tips for purposeful and great communication.

1. Eye contact is essential.

Although the use of eye contact can be culturally influenced, our American culture supports the "meeting of the eyes" as an important aspect of nonverbal communication. The expressions of the face and eyes provide keys for obtaining social and emotional information and are a basis for trust development and believability. You don't have to do it every second of the conversation, but the more the better. It signifies that you are listening.

2. Turn off all electronics and put down the Sudoku puzzle!

There is no such thing as true multitasking. All diversion of attention



depletes the focus of the discussion and offers the attitude that you really don't care enough to stop and listen. The opposite is also true. Listening causes others to feel appreciated, worthy, interesting and respected.

3. Practice and use active-listening skills.

The University of Colorado's Conflict Research Consortium states that this structured manner of listening and responding improves mutual understanding. By practicing these three steps, people become adept at deep listening and concise responding.

A. The listener must turn to face the speaker and really "listen in." Leaning in toward the speaker will also show interest.

B. The listener then repeats in his/her own words what he/she thinks the speaker has said.

C. The speaker then comments on the accuracy of the "repeat" and makes

corrections, if necessary, or goes on to continue the discussion.

Sounds easy right? This is common therapeutic training for psychotherapists, counselors and is naturally utilized by great business CEOs.

4. Set the timer.

In a busy schedule, you may have to ask for special discussion time. Fifteen minutes is enough time for listening newbies to practice these new fabulous skills to obtain positive results. Avoid sharing how you handled a similar situation unless you ask, "Would you like to know what I did or would do in your (or a similar) situation?" Ask permission before offering information. Sometimes (most times) people, especially women, benefit from the opportunity to share and vent their feelings and thoughts more than the prospect of gathering possible problem-solving options. Responding with "uh-huhs," nods, and asking for more information will go a long way in building good rapport.

5. Summarize discussion and set a new plan.

End the discussion with a short summary and a "thanks for listening." It will help create the next positive listening moment.

Utilizing these techniques will not blend the sexes and create a homogeneous scene of unisex gossiping or "keep to the facts ma'am" boring dialogues. It may, however, help to promote better appreciation of our differences and quite possibly create an extra romantic moment or two—all caused by the power and connection of looking into another's eyes and hearing their soul.

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