

# How to be a good listener, and how to know when you're doing it right

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Being a good listener means having empathy. But empathy is one of the [most misunderstood](#) listening skills.

Empathy is what we feel when we are trying to understand the world [from the perspective of another person](#).

One of the common misconceptions about empathy is that you need to have lived through what the other person has experienced to understand them.

Simply having the same experiences as another person is not enough to understand them. Two people can face the same challenges or difficulties, but respond in completely different ways. Your experiences are unique to you and no one else can know how you feel, even if they have been wearing your shoes. The only way to understand how someone feels is to listen to them, without assuming that they feel the same as you did in that situation.

So, let's think about empathy in a different way.

## **Your unique perception of the world**

Imagine that every baby is born holding a wooden frame that contains a pane of glass. Whenever they look at anything in the world, they do so through this glass.

The glass is not completely clear when they receive it. It is slightly warped and discolored, and these are the marks of their genetics and biology. This means that everyone has a different piece of glass through which to see the world. And this glass becomes more marked as each of us moves through our lives. Every experience—good and bad—changes the glass. It warps, scratches and smudges. Parts of it may be stained in different colors like church windows. And so our view of the world changes as the glass changes over time.

We do not see the world as it truly exists. Rather we see the world through a filter created by our biology and [life experiences](#).

## Frame of reference

Counselors often talk about looking through the client's [frame of reference](#). The pane of glass in the wooden frame is your frame of reference.

To be a good listener, you need to stand at the side of the speaker and try to look out at the world through their glass.

Don't say, "I'm sorry that your glass is scratched." That would be sympathy—not a bad thing in itself, but not helpful for listening. Sympathy means that you [feel sorry for the other person](#) and you want to reduce their suffering. This is kind, but it does not mean that you understand their needs, feelings and experiences. You can feel sorry for someone without actually listening to them at all.

Don't try to clean the glass or fix the scratches. That might help them to see more clearly, but it would be like trying to make some of their life experiences disappear or change who they are as a person. They earned every single mark on their glass through the life that they lived, and no one has the right to take those away.

But don't ignore the marks on the glass. Ask questions about this scratch and that smudge and those colorful stains, then listen to the answers without taking the opportunity to tell them about your own scratches and smudges. This can be difficult because [we love to talk about ourselves](#). So be aware of this temptation and remember to focus on the other person whenever you feel the urge to share.

Imagine you are talking to someone who is terrified of giving presentations. It might not be helpful to have sympathy ("I feel for you") or share your own [experiences](#) ("I used to be nervous too") or rush in with solutions ("imagine your audience is naked"). Instead, try asking

questions about their experience of public speaking and listen to the answers.

You might ask what thoughts go through their head during presentations, and where those thoughts and feelings first began. This can help you find the scratch that is changing their view of the world. For example, their glass might have been scratched when they were bullied in school and looking at the world through this scratched bit of glass means that they see it filled with people who will laugh at them if they make a mistake.

Using empathy by trying to genuinely understand the other person means that your listening skills also help them to better understand themselves. And understanding is the first step towards taking charge of your own problems and finding your own solutions.

## **Learning to listen**

As you practice trying to see the world through the frame of reference of the person who is speaking, you will find that you are less likely to misunderstand, less likely to rush in with advice, and more likely to connect on a deeper level.

This is [how counselors build](#) a therapeutic relationship.

You will know when you are building rapport through listening because you will start to genuinely want to hear and understand that person. You will stop wanting to interrupt with your own thoughts. You will stop trying to push the conversation in a certain direction to talk about your own interests or serve your own agenda. You will stop getting distracted by things around you or your internal voice.

Instead, you will become immersed in the world the speaker is sharing. And this is how to be a good listener.

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