

The Art and Science of Listening

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Empathetic listening is a complex skill that requires the listener to understand fully what the speaker is trying to say by paying attention to not just the spoken words but also the body language and emotional subtext. However, has the human brain, which gained consciousness 5 million years ago, evolved to actively listen? The answer, surprisingly, is in the negative. Our brain is evolutionarily hardwired to evaluate input, predict outcomes and make judgements on a moment-to-moment basis, all of which active listening discourages. Hence, the biggest challenge of active, empathetic listening is to go against the very preferred mode of function of the brain. But before we get too ahead of ourselves, let's try to understand what exactly goes on in your upper story when mindful listening happens.

When you're listening to someone mindfully, your prefrontal cortex lights up with activity. This is the same part of your brain which helps you in planning and making decisions.

When you feel that you're being listened to, your brain produces the "social bonding" hormone called oxytocin. The release of this feel-good hormone makes you want to bond with the listener.

It has been found that when effective communication occurs, the brain activity of the listener mirrors that of the speaker with a short lag of just 1 second.

When you're being listened to by an active listener, the reward region of your brain gets activated. The same region activates when you have rewarding life experiences.

Getting enough sleep and taking good care of your health helps in strengthening neural connections and improving focus, which enables you to become a better listener.

Kind active listening from adults is crucial for children's brain and language development and well-being. A child whose emotion is ignored or misunderstood can develop a state of stress that activates fear which can be toxic to psychological and motor health.

One can conclude from the above facts that listening is an active process, rather than a passive one. It is the "conscious processing of the auditory stimuli that have been perceived through hearing" (West & Turner, 2010). It requires the listener to be present at the moment, invested in the speaker's story and maintain a healthy balance between being passive versus being overly active. This begs the question, is mindful listening so complicated and hard to master? The act of listening should be simple, shouldn't it? Why does hearing come naturally but listening doesn't? The answer lies in how you approach information on a daily basis. Your brain navigates

through an avalanche of information every day by picking up only the bits and pieces it feels are necessary to it. The same mental shortcut is at play when we are trying to listen, thus slipping back into our brain's preferred mode of function.

According to Ram Charan, a noted business adviser who has worked with top executives at some of the world's most successful companies, "Truly empathetic listening requires courage — the willingness to let go of the old habits and embrace new ones. But once acquired, these listening habits are the very skills that turn would-be leaders into true ones."

Change, we must. If going against our brains hardwiring means creating a world where people feel heard, then it's a path worth taking. Evolution is a never-ending process that requires us to keep pushing our limits. Most importantly, we can choose the kind of evolution we want to go through (perhaps the only species capable of that). Let us pledge to evolve into a species that listens empathetically and mindfully, with no judgements, only love and respect for each other.

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