

Active Listening Exercise for Couples

Preparation:

Set aside about an hour to focus fully on this exercise. Your space should be quiet and clear.

Turn off all phones and other devices that could distract you.

Prepare for the session by composing yourself (i.e be calm and focussed).

This exercise should be attempted with gentleness and respect at all times. It wont work unless both partners are willing to be genuine, open and trusting.

Each sequence lasts 30-40 minutes:

15-20 minutes for the speaker and 15-20 minutes for the feedback/clarification. You might like to use a clock or timer that you can both see. If the speaker is done sooner that's fine.

Roles:

The Speaker's role

The speaker's task is to provide direct information on any matter of concern in a way that the listener can potentially understand, using "I statements" (statements that start with the word I; "I think...", "I know", or "I feel..."). Sentences must not start with the word "you". The speaker should speak slowly, providing the listener time to understand fully and completely what they mean and what they are concerned with.

The Listener's role

The listener's role is to understand what it is like to experience the world through the speaker's eyes. To hear, but more importantly to *understand* what the speaker is saying – both at the surface level and at a deeper level. Try to understand where your partner is coming from and relate to their perspective. While listening, focus attention on your partner and what they are saying. Try not to focus on the accuracy of what is said, but rather how the speaker feels. Unlike other situations, in this activity how the speaker feels is more important to grasp than the facts. Do not think of or plan out what you will say in response until it is time for feedback. Avoid the temptation to jump to defend or attack. Be open to how your partner unfolds his or her story.

Step-by-Step Instructions:

1. **Decide who will be the *speaker*** and who will be the *listener*. You will swap roles after the first sequence
1. Sitting **facing your partner, make eye contact** and then close your eyes
2. Within yourself, **make a heartfelt commitment** to be fully present, open and available for your partner
3. Slowly open your eyes, and once again **establish eye contact**
4. The speaker now **begins speaking** (using I statements) and the listener **begins listening** actively
5. When the speaker is finished, or **after 20 minutes, stop** and look at each other in silence for a minute or two
6. **Feedback & Clarification:** Now is time for the listener to provide a summary of what they understand the speaker to have been saying/meaning/feeling. This is the most important step, as this is where the speaker finds out if the listener's understanding is correct. This can take up to 15 minutes.
7. **Reverse roles** and begin the second sequence
8. End the exercise by **expressing mutual gratitude, appreciation and warmth.**

Couples will get better at performing this exercise every time it is practiced.

It may feel awkward or unhelpful at first, but keep at it.

It may be helpful to commit to trying it a few times,
or on a regular basis such as every evening or once a week.

Remember the skills taught here: *I statements* and *active listening* are helpful at all times,
but using this exercise assures you a safe zone to really get your feelings across.