LISTENING: More Than Meets the Ear

MAKING THE GRADE

Here are the topics discussed in this chapter:

- **Listening Defined**
  - Hearing versus Listening
  - Mindless Listening
  - Mindful Listening

- **Elements in the Listening Process**
  - Hearing
  - Attending
  - Understanding
  - Responding
  - Remembering

- **The Challenge of Listening**
  - Types of Ineffective Listening
  - Why We Don’t Listen Better
  - Meeting the Challenge of Listening Better

- **Types of Listening Responses**
  - Prompting
  - Questioning
  - Paraphrasing
  - Supporting
  - Analyzing
  - Advising
  - Judging
  - Choosing the Best Listening Response

- **Making the Grade**
  - Summary
  - Key Terms
  - Online Resources
  - Search Terms
  - Film and Television

After studying the topics in this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Identify the situations in which you listen mindfully and those when you listen mindlessly, and evaluate the appropriateness of each style in a given situation.
2. Identify the circumstances in which you listen ineffectively, and the poor listening habits you use in these circumstances.
3. Identify the response styles (listed on pages 247–261) that you commonly use when listening to others.
4. Demonstrate a combination of listening styles you could use to respond effectively in a given situation.
Ric Masten’s poem on this page shows that there’s more to listening than gazing politely at a speaker and nodding your head. As you will soon learn, listening is a demanding and complex activity—and just as important as speaking in the communication process.

If we use frequency as a measure, then listening easily qualifies as the most important kind of communication. We spend more time listening to others than in any other type of communication. One study (summarized in Figure 7.1) revealed that college students spend about 11 percent of their communicating time writing, 16 percent speaking, 17 percent reading, but more than 55 percent listening. On the job, listening is just as important. Studies show that most employees of major corporations in North America spend about 60 percent of each workday listening to others.

Besides being the most frequent form of communication, listening is at least as important as speaking in terms of making relationships work. In committed relationships, listening to personal information in everyday conversations is considered a vital ingredient of satisfaction. In one survey, marital counselors identified “failing to take the other’s perspective when listening” as one of the most frequent communication problems in the couples with whom they worked. When a group of adults was asked what communication skills were most important in family and social settings, listening was ranked first.

The *International Journal of Listening* devoted an entire issue to exploring various contexts in which listening skills are crucial, including education, health care, religion, and the business world. The On the Job box on page 238 explores in detail the vital role listening plays in the workplace.
This chapter will explore the nature of listening. After defining listening, we will examine the elements that make up the listening process and look at challenges that come with becoming a better listener. Finally, you will read about a variety of listening response styles that you can use to better understand and even help others.

**Listening Defined**

So far we’ve used the term *listening* as if it needs no explanation. Actually, there’s more to this concept than you might think. We will define *listening*—at least the interpersonal type—as the process of making sense of others’ spoken messages. Because listening is a response to speech, there’s obviously a nonverbal dimension as well. As you read in Chapter 6, the way a statement is expressed can affect its meaning. So a good listener pays attention to paralanguage, facial expression, and a host of other nonverbal cues. We’ll focus now on explaining what is—and isn’t—involved in listening to others.

**HEARING VERSUS LISTENING**

People often think of hearing and listening as the same thing, but they are quite different. *Hearing* is the process in which sound waves strike the eardrum and cause vibrations that are transmitted to the brain. (You’ll read more about hearing in the following section.) *Listening* occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses into a representation of the original sound and then gives them meaning. Barring illness, injury, or cotton plugs, you can’t stop hearing. Your ears will pick up sound waves and transmit them to your brain whether you want them to or not.

Listening, however, isn’t automatic. As the cartoon on page 239 shows, people hear all the time without listening. Sometimes we automatically and unconsciously block out irritating sounds, such as a neighbor’s lawnmower or the roar of nearby traffic. We also stop listening when we find a subject unimportant or uninteresting. Boring stories, TV commercials, and nagging complaints are common examples of messages we may tune out.

**MINDLESS LISTENING**

When we move beyond hearing and start to listen, researchers note that we process information in two very different ways—sometimes referred to as the *dual-process theory*. Social scientists use the terms “mindless” and “mindful” to describe these different ways of listening. *Mindless listening* occurs when we react to others’ messages automatically and routinely, without much mental investment. Words like “superficial” and “cursory” describe mindless listening better than terms like “ponder” and “contemplate.”

While the term *mindless* may sound negative, this sort of low-level information processing is a potentially valuable type of communication, because it frees us to focus our minds on messages that require our careful attention. Given the number of messages to which we’re exposed, it’s impractical to listen carefully and thoughtfully 100 percent
of the time. It’s also unrealistic to devote your attention to long-winded stories, idle chatter, or remarks you’ve heard many times before. The only realistic way to manage the onslaught of messages is to be “lazy” toward many of them. In situations like these, we forego careful analysis and fall back on the schemas—and sometimes the stereotypes—described in Chapter 3 to make sense of a message. If you stop right now and recall the messages you have heard today, it’s likely that you processed most of them mindlessly.

MINDFUL LISTENING

By contrast, mindful listening involves giving careful and thoughtful attention and responses to the messages we receive. You tend to listen mindfully when a message is important to you, and also when someone you care about is speaking about a matter that is important to him or her. Think of how your ears perk up when someone starts talking about your money (“The repairs will cost me how much?”), or how you tune in carefully when a close friend tells you about the loss of a loved one. In situations like these, you want to give the message sender your complete and undivided attention.

Sometimes we respond mindlessly to information that deserves—and even demands—our mindful attention. Ellen Langer’s determination to study mindfulness began when her grandmother complained about headaches coming from a “snake crawling around” beneath her skull. The doctors quickly diagnosed the problem as senility—after all, they reasoned, senility comes with old age and makes people talk nonsense. In fact, the grandmother had a brain tumor that eventually took her life. The event made a deep impression on Langer:

MINDFUL LISTENING
For years afterward I kept thinking about the doctors’ reactions to my grandmother’s complaints, and about our reactions to the doctors. They went through the motions of diagnosis, but were not open to what they were hearing. Mindsets about senility interfered. We did not question the doctors; mindsets about experts interfered.\(^{14}\)

Most of our daily decisions about whether to listen mindfully don’t have life-and-death consequences, but the point should be clear: There are times when we need to consciously and carefully listen to what others are telling us. That kind of mindful listening will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

### Elements in the Listening Process

By now, you can begin to see that there is more to listening than sitting quietly while another person speaks. In truth, listening is a process that consists of five elements: hearing, attending, understanding, responding, and remembering.

#### HEARING

As we have already discussed, **hearing** is the physiological dimension of listening. It occurs when sound waves strike the ear at a certain frequency and loudness. Hearing is influenced by a variety of factors, including background noise. If there are other loud noises, especially at the same frequency as the message we are trying to hear, we find it difficult to sort out the important signals from the background. Hearing is also affected by auditory fatigue, a temporary loss of hearing caused by continuous exposure to the same tone or loudness. If you spend an evening at a loud party, you may have trouble hearing well, even after getting away from the crowd. If you are exposed to loud noise often enough, permanent hearing loss can result—as many rock musicians and fans can attest.

For many communicators, the challenge of hearing is even more difficult as a result of physiological problems. In the United States alone, more than 22 million people communicate with some degree of hearing impairment.\(^{15}\) One study revealed that, on any given day, one-fourth to one-third of the children in a typical classroom did not hear normally.\(^ {16}\) As a competent communicator, you need to recognize when you may be speaking to someone with a hearing loss and adjust your approach accordingly.
ATTENDING

Whereas hearing is a physiological process, attending is a psychological one and is part of the process of selection described in Chapter 3. We would go crazy if we attended to every sound we hear, so we filter out some messages and focus on others. Needs, wants, desires, and interests determine what is attended to. Not surprisingly, research shows that we attend most carefully to messages when there’s a payoff for doing so. If you’re planning to see a movie, you’ll listen to a friend’s description more carefully than you would have otherwise. And when you want to get better acquainted with others, you’ll pay careful attention to almost anything they say, in hopes of improving the relationship.

Surprisingly, attending doesn’t help just the listener: It also helps the message sender. Participants in one study viewed brief movie segments and then described them to listeners who varied in their degree of attentiveness to the speakers. Later on, the researchers tested the speakers’ long-term recall of details from the movie segments. Those who had recounted the movie to attentive listeners remembered more details of the film.

UNDERSTANDING

Understanding occurs when we make sense of a message. It is possible to hear and attend to a message without understanding it at all. And, of course, it’s possible to misunderstand a message. Communication researchers use the term listening fidelity to describe the degree of congruence between what a listener understands and what the message sender was attempting to communicate. This chapter describes the many reasons why we misunderstand others—and why they misunderstand us. It also outlines skills that will help you improve your understanding of others.

RESPONDING

Responding to a message consists of giving observable feedback to the speaker. Although listeners don’t always respond visibly to a speaker, research suggests they should do so more often. One study of 195 critical incidents in banking and medical settings showed that a major difference between effective and ineffective listening was the kind of feedback offered. Good listeners show they are attentive by nonverbal behaviors such as keeping eye contact and reacting with appropriate facial expressions—which was of particular importance to children in one study who were asked to evaluate “good” versus “bad” listeners. Verbal behavior—answering questions and exchanging ideas, for example—also demonstrates attention. It’s easy to imagine how other responses would signal less effective listening. A slumped posture, bored expression, and yawning send a clear message that you are not tuned in to the speaker.

Adding responsiveness to our listening model demonstrates a fact that we discussed in Chapter 1: Communication is transactional in nature. Listening isn’t just a passive activity. As listeners, we are active participants in a communication transaction. At the same time we receive messages, we also send them. Responding is such an integral part of good listening that we’ll devote an entire section to listening responses at the end of this chapter.
REMEMBERING

Remembering is the ability to recall information. If we don’t remember a message, listening is hardly worth the effort. Research suggests that most people remember only about 50 percent of what they hear immediately after hearing it.22 Within 8 hours, the 50 percent remembered drops to about 35 percent. After two months, the average recall is only about 25 percent of the original message. Given the amount of information we process every day—from teachers, friends, the radio, TV, and other sources—the residual message (what we remember) is a small fraction of what we hear. Although the tendency to forget information is common, there are ways to improve your retention and recall. You’ll learn some of those ways later in this chapter. For now, though, you can begin to get a sense of how tough it is to listen effectively by trying the exercise on the next page.

The Challenge of Listening

It’s easy to acknowledge that listening is important and to describe the steps in the listening process. What’s difficult is to actually become a better listener. This section will describe the challenges that listeners must face and overcome to become more effective communicators. We’ll look at various types of ineffective listening, then we’ll explore the many reasons we don’t listen better. As you read this material, think to yourself, “How many of these describe me?” The first step to becoming a better listener is to recognize areas that need improvement.
TYPES OF INEFFECTIVE LISTENING

Your own experience will probably confirm the fact that poor listening is all too common. Although a certain amount of ineffective listening is inescapable and sometimes even understandable, it’s important to be aware of these types of problems so you can avoid them when listening well really counts.

PSEUDOLISTENING   Whereas mindless listening may be a private matter, pseudolistening is an imitation of the real thing—an act put on to fool the speaker. Pseudolisteners give the appearance of being attentive: They look you in the eye; they may even nod and smile. But the show of attention is a polite façade because their minds are somewhere else. Paradoxically, pseudolistening can take more effort than simply tuning out the other person.

STAGE-HOGGING   Stage-hogs (sometimes called “conversational narcissists”) try to turn the topic of conversations to themselves instead of showing interest in the speaker. One stage-hogging strategy is a “shift-response”—changing the focus of the conversation from the speaker to the narcissist: “You think your math class is tough? You ought to try my physics class!” Interruptions are another hallmark of stage-hogging. Besides preventing the listener from learning potentially valuable information, they can damage the relationship between the interrupter and the speaker. For example, applicants who interrupt the questions of employment interviewers are likely to be rated less favorably than applicants who wait until the interviewer has finished speaking before they respond.

SELECTIVE LISTENING   Selective listeners respond only to the parts of your remarks that interest them, rejecting everything else. Sometimes selective listening is legitimate, as when we screen out radio commercials and music and keep an ear cocked for a weather report or an announcement of the time. Selective listen-
ing is less appropriate in personal settings, when your obvious inattention can be a slap in the face to the other person.

**INSULATED LISTENING** Insulated listeners are almost the opposite of their selective cousins just described. Instead of looking for specific information, these people avoid it. Whenever a topic arises that they’d rather not deal with, those who use *insulated listening* simply fail to hear or acknowledge it. You remind them about a problem, and they’ll nod or answer you—and then promptly ignore or forget what you’ve just said.

**DEFENSIVE LISTENING** Defensive listeners take others’ remarks as personal attacks. The teenager who perceives her parents’ questions about her friends and activities as distrustful snooping uses *defensive listening*, as do touchy parents who view any questioning by their children as a threat to their authority and parental wisdom. As Chapter 10 will suggest, it’s fair to assume that many defensive listeners are suffering from shaky presenting images and avoid admitting it by projecting their own insecurities onto others.

**AMBUSHING** Ambushers listen carefully to you, but only because they’re collecting information that they’ll use to attack what you say. The technique of a cross-examining prosecution attorney is a good example of *ambushing*. Needless to say, using this kind of strategy will justifiably initiate defensiveness in the other person.

**INSENSITIVE LISTENING** Those who use *insensitive listening* respond to the superficial content in a message but miss the more important emotional information that may not be expressed directly. “How’s it going?” an insensitive listener might ask. When you reply by saying “Oh, okay I guess” in a dejected tone, he or she responds “Well, great!” Insensitive listeners tend to ignore the nonverbal cues described in Chapter 6 and lack the empathy described in Chapter 3.

**WHY WE DON’T LISTEN BETTER**

After thinking about the styles of ineffective listening described previously, most people begin to see that they listen carefully only a small percentage of the time. Sad as it may be, it’s impossible to listen well *all of the time*, for several reasons that we’ll outline here.

**MESSAGE OVERLOAD** It’s especially difficult to focus on messages—even important ones—when you are bombarded by information. Face-to-face messages come from friends, family, work, and school. Personal media—text messages, phone calls, emails, and instant messages—demand your attention. Along with these personal channels, we are awash in messages from the mass media. This deluge of communication has made the challenge of attending tougher than at any time in human history.25

---

Bore, n. A person who talks when you wish him to listen.

Conversation, n. A fair for the display of the minor mental commodities, each exhibitor being too intent upon arrangement of his own wares to observe those of his neighbor.

Egotist, n. A person of low taste more interested in himself than me.

Heaven, n. A place where the wicked cease from troubling you with talk of their personal affairs, and the good listen with attention while you expound your own.

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*
PREOCCUPATION  Another reason we don’t always listen carefully is that we’re often wrapped up in personal concerns that seem more important than the messages that others are sending. It’s difficult to pay attention to someone else when you’re worrying about an upcoming exam or thinking about the great time you plan to have over the next weekend.

RAPID THOUGHT  Listening carefully is also difficult for a physiological reason. Although we’re capable of understanding speech at rates of up to 600 words per minute, the average person only speaks between 100 and 150 words per minute.26 Thus, we have mental “spare time” while someone is talking. The temptation is to use this time in ways that don’t relate to the speaker’s ideas: thinking about personal interests, daydreaming, planning a rebuttal, and so on. The trick is to use this spare time to understand the speaker’s ideas better, rather than to let your attention wander.

EFFORT  Listening effectively is hard work. The physical changes that occur during careful listening show the effort it takes: The heart rate quickens, respiration increases, and body temperature rises.27 Notice that these changes are similar to the body’s reaction to physical effort. This is no coincidence, because listening carefully to a speaker can be just as taxing as a workout—which is why some people choose not to make the effort.28 If you’ve come home exhausted after an evening of listening intently to a friend in need, you know how draining the process can be.

EXTERNAL NOISE  The physical world in which we live often presents distractions that make it difficult to pay attention to others. Consider, for example, how the efficiency of your listening decreases when you are seated in a crowded, hot, stuffy room, surrounded by others talking next to you and traffic noises outside. It’s not surprising that noisy classrooms often make learning difficult for students.29 In such circumstances, even the best intentions aren’t enough to ensure clear understanding.

FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS  We often make faulty assumptions that lead us to believe we’re listening attentively when quite the opposite is true. When the subject is a familiar one, it’s easy to tune out because you think you’ve heard it all before. A related problem arises when you assume that a speaker’s thoughts are too simple or too obvious to deserve careful attention, when in fact they do. At other times just the opposite occurs: You think that another’s comments are too complex to be understood (as in some lectures), so you give up trying to make sense of them.

LACK OF APPARENT ADVANTAGES  It often seems that there’s more to gain by speaking than by listening. When business consultant Nancy Kline asked some of her clients...
why they interrupted their colleagues, these are the reasons she heard:

- My idea is better than theirs.
- If I don’t interrupt them, I’ll never get to say my idea.
- I know what they are about to say.
- They don’t need to finish their thoughts since mine are better.
- Nothing about their idea will improve with further development.
- It is more important for me to get recognized than it is to hear their idea.
- I am more important than they are.

Even if some of these thoughts are true, the egotism behind them is stunning. Furthermore, nonlisteners are likely to find that the people they cut off are less likely to treat their ideas with respect. Like defensiveness, listening is often reciprocal. You get what you give.

**LACK OF TRAINING** Even if we want to listen well, we’re often hampered by a lack of training. A common but mistaken belief is that listening is like breathing—an activity that people do well naturally. “After all,” the common belief goes, “I’ve been listening since I was a child. I don’t need to study the subject in school.” The truth is that listening is a skill much like speaking: Virtually everybody does it, though few people do it well. Unfortunately, there is no connection between how competently most communicators think they listen and how competent they really are in their ability to understand others. The good news is that listening can be improved through instruction and training. Despite this fact, the amount of time spent teaching listening is far less than that spent on other types of communication. Table 7.1 reflects this upside-down arrangement.

**HEARING PROBLEMS** Sometimes a person’s listening ability suffers from a physiological hearing problem. In such cases, both the person with the problem and others can become frustrated at the ineffective communication that results. One survey explored the feelings of adults who have spouses with hearing loss. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said they feel annoyed when their partner can’t hear them clearly. Almost one-quarter said that beyond just being annoyed, they felt ignored, hurt, or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.1 Comparison of Communication Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listening</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sad. Many of the respondents believe their spouses are in denial about their condition, which makes the problem even more frustrating. If you suspect that you or someone you know suffers from a hearing loss, it’s wise to have a physician or audiologist perform an examination.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF LISTENING BETTER

After reading the last few pages, you might decide that listening well is next to impossible. Fortunately, with the right combination of attitude and skill, you can indeed listen better. The following guidelines will show you how.

TALK LESS  Zeno of Citium put it most succinctly: “We have been given two ears and but a single mouth, in order that we may hear more and talk less.” If your true goal is to understand the speaker, avoid the tendency to hog the stage and shift the conversation to your ideas. Talking less doesn’t mean you must remain completely silent. As you’ll soon read, giving feedback that clarifies your understanding and seeks new information is an important way to understand a speaker. Nonetheless, most of us talk too much when we’re claiming to understand others. Other cultures, including many Native American ones, value listening at least as much as talking. You can appreciate the value of this approach by trying the exercise below.

GET RID OF DISTRACTIONS  Some distractions are external: ringing telephones, radio or television programs, friends dropping in, and so on. Other distractions are internal: preoccupation with your own problems, an empty stomach, and so on. If the information you’re seeking is really important, do everything possible to eliminate the internal and external distractions that interfere with careful listening. This might mean turning off the TV, shutting off your cell phone, or moving to a quiet room where you won’t be bothered by the lure of...

INVITATION TO INSIGHT

Speaking and Listening with a “Talking Stick”

Explore the benefits of talking less and listening more by using a “Talking Stick.” This exercise is based on the Native American tradition of “council.” Gather a group of people in a circle, and designate a particular object as the talking stick. (Almost any manageable object will do.) Participants then pass the object around the circle. Each person may speak

a. When holding the stick
b. For as long as he or she holds the stick
c. Without interruption from anyone else in the circle

When a member is through speaking, the stick passes to the left, and the speaker surrendering the stick must wait until it has made its way around the circle before speaking again.

After each member of the group has had the chance to speak, discuss how this experience differed from more common approaches to listening. Decide how the desirable parts of this method could be introduced into everyday conversations.

To be heard, there are times you must be silent.—Chinese proverb
the computer, the work on your desk, or the food on the counter. (See the reading on page 248 for an example of removing distractions from business meetings.)

**DON’T JUDGE PREMATURELY** Most people would agree that it’s essential to understand a speaker’s ideas before judging them. However, all of us are guilty of forming snap judgments, evaluating others before hearing them out. This tendency is greatest when the speaker’s ideas conflict with our own. Conversations that ought to be exchanges of ideas turn into verbal battles, with the “opponents” trying to ambush one another in order to win a victory. It’s also tempting to judge prematurely when others criticize you, even when those criticisms may contain valuable truths and when understanding them may lead to a change for the better. Even if there is no criticism or disagreement, we tend to evaluate others based on sketchy first impressions, forming snap judgments that aren’t at all valid. The lesson contained in these negative examples is clear: Listen first. Make sure you understand. Then evaluate.

**LOOK FOR KEY IDEAS** It’s easy to lose patience with long-winded speakers who never seem to get to the point—or have a point, for that matter. Nonetheless, most people do have a central idea. By using your ability to think more quickly than the speaker can talk, you may be able to extract the central idea from the surrounding mass of words you’re hearing. If you can’t figure out what the speaker is driving at, you can always use a variety of response skills, which we’ll examine now.

**Types of Listening Responses**

Of the five components of listening (hearing, attending, understanding, responding, and remembering), *responding* lets us know how well others are tuned in to what we’re saying. Think for a moment of someone you consider a good listener. Why did you choose that person? It’s probably because of the way she or he responds while you are speaking: making eye contact and nodding when you’re talking, staying attentive while you’re telling an important story, reacting with an exclamation when you say something startling, expressing empathy and support when you’re hurting, and offering another perspective or advice when you ask for it.35

The rest of this chapter will describe a variety of response styles. We’ll begin by describing responses that are focused on gathering more information to better understand the speaker. By chapter’s end, our focus will be on listening responses that offer a speaker our assessment and direction.

**PROMPTING**

In some cases, the best response a listener can give is a small nudge to keep the speaker talking. *Prompting* involves using silences and brief statements of encouragement to

[Image]

“You haven’t been listening. I keep telling you that I don’t want a product fit for a king.”

© 2009 Ted Goff, www.newslettercartoons.com

The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.

—Henry David Thoreau
Part Two  Looking Out

Meetings Going “Topless”

As the capital of information technology, Silicon Valley may have more gadgets per capita than any other place on the planet. Yet, even here, “always on” can be a real turnoff.

Frustrated by workers so plugged in that they tuned out in the middle of business meetings, a growing number of companies are going “topless,” as in no laptops allowed. Also banned from some conference rooms: BlackBerrys, iPhones and other devices on which so many people have come to depend.

Over the years, companies have come up with innovative ways to keep meetings from sucking up time. Some remove chairs and force people to stand. Others get everyone to drink a glass of water beforehand.

But as laptops got lighter and smart phones even smarter, people discovered a handy diversion—making more eye contact with their screens than one another. The practice became so pervasive that Todd Wilkens, who runs a San Francisco design firm, waged a “personal war against CrackBerry.”

“In this age of wireless Internet and mobile e-mail devices, having an effective meeting or working session is becoming more and more difficult,” he wrote on his company blog in November. “Laptops, Blackberrys, Sidekicks, iPhones and the like keep people from being fully present. Aside from just being rude, partial attention generally leads to partial results.”

Wilkens’ firm, Adaptive Path, now encourages everyone to leave their laptops at their desks. His colleague, Dan Saffer, coined the term “topless” as in laptop-less. Mobile and smart phones must be stowed on a counter or in a box during meetings.

“All of our meetings got a lot more productive,” Wilkens said.

Jessica Guynn, Los Angeles Times

draw others out. Besides helping you to better understand the speaker, prompting can also help others clarify their thoughts and feelings. Consider this example:

**Pablo:** Julie’s dad is selling a complete computer system for only $600, but if I want it, I have to buy it now. He’s got another interested buyer. It’s a great deal, but buying it would wipe out my savings. At the rate I spend money, it would take me a year to save up this much again.

**Tim:** Uh-huh.

**Pablo:** I wouldn’t be able to take that ski trip over winter break . . . but I sure could save time with my schoolwork . . . and do a better job, too.

**Tim:** That’s for sure.

**Pablo:** Do you think I should buy it?

**Tim:** I don’t know. What do you think?

**Pablo:** I just can’t decide.

**Tim:** (Silence)

**Pablo:** I’m going to do it. I’ll never get a deal like this again.
In cases like this, your prompting can be a catalyst to help others find their own answers. Prompting will work best when it’s done sincerely. Your nonverbal behaviors—eye contact, posture, facial expression, tone of voice—have to show that you are concerned with the other person’s problem. Mechanical prompting is likely to irritate instead of help.

**QUESTIONING**

It’s easy to understand why questioning has been called “the most popular piece of language.” Asking for information can help both the person doing the asking and the one providing answers.

Questioning can help you, the asker, in at least three ways. Most obviously, the answers you get can fill in facts and details that will sharpen your understanding (“Did he give you any reasons for doing that?” “What happened next?”). Also, by asking questions you can learn what others are thinking and feeling (“What’s on your mind?” “Are you mad at me?”), as well as what they might want (“Are you asking me to apologize?”). Besides being useful to the person doing the asking, questions can also be a tool for the one who answers. As people in the helping professions know, questions can encourage self-discovery. Playing counselor can be a dangerous game, but there are times when you can use questions to encourage others to explore their thoughts and feelings. “So, what do you see as your options?” may prompt an employee to come up with creative problem-solving alternatives. “What would be your ideal solution?” might help a friend get in touch with various wants and needs. Most importantly, encouraging discovery rather than dispensing advice indicates you have faith in others’ ability to think for themselves. This may be the most important message that you can communicate as an effective listener.

Despite their apparent benefits, not all questions are equally helpful. Whereas sincere questions are aimed at understanding others, counterfeit questions are aimed at sending a message, not receiving one. Counterfeit questions come in several varieties:

- **Questions that trap the speaker.** When your friend says, “You didn’t like that movie, did you?”, you’re being backed into a corner. It’s clear that your friend disapproves, so the question leaves you with two choices: You can disagree and defend your position, or you can devalue your reaction by lying or equivocating—“I guess it wasn’t perfect.” Consider how much easier it would be to respond to the sincere question, “What did you think of the movie?”
Part Two
Looking Out

• **Tag question.** Phrases like “did you?” or “isn’t that right?” at the end of a question can be a tip-off that the asker is looking for agreement, not information. Although some tag questions are genuine requests for confirmation, counterfeit ones are used to coerce agreement: “You said you’d call at 5 o’clock, but you forgot, didn’t you?” Similarly, leading questions that begin with “Don’t you” (such as, “Don’t you think he would make a good boss?”) direct others toward a desired response. As a simple solution, changing “Don’t you?” to “Do you?” makes the question less leading.

• **Questions that make statements.** “Are you finally off the phone?” is more of a statement than a question—a fact unlikely to be lost on the targeted person. Emphasizing certain words can also turn a question into a statement: “You lent money to Tony?” We also use questions to offer advice. The person who asks “Are you going to stand up to him and give him what he deserves?” clearly has stated an opinion about what should be done.

• **Questions that carry hidden agendas.** “Are you busy Friday night?” is a dangerous question to answer. If you say “No,” thinking the person has something fun in mind, you won’t like hearing, “Good, because I need some help moving my piano.” Obviously, such questions are not designed to enhance understanding: They are setups for the proposal that follows. Other examples include, “Will you do me a favor?” and “If I tell you what happened, will you promise not to get mad?” Wise communicators answer questions that mask hidden agendas cautiously, with responses like “It depends” or “Let me hear what you have in mind before I answer.”

• **Questions that seek “correct” answers.** Most of us have been victims of questioners who want to hear only a particular response. “Which shoes do you think I should wear?” can be a sincere question—unless the asker has a predetermined preference. When this happens, the asker isn’t interested in listening to contrary opinions, and “incorrect” responses get shot down. Some of these questions may venture into delicate territory. “Honey, do you think I look fat?” can be a request for a “correct” answer.

• **Questions based on unchecked assumptions.** “Why aren’t you listening to me?” assumes that the other person isn’t paying attention. “What’s the matter?” assumes that something is wrong. As Chapter 3 explains, perception checking is a much better way of checking out assumptions. As you recall, a perception check offers a description and interpretations, followed by a sincere request for clarification: “When you kept looking over at the TV, I thought you weren’t listening to me, but maybe I was wrong. Were you paying attention?”

**Paraphrasing**

For all its value, questioning won’t always help you understand or help others. As the cartoon on page 249 shows, questions can even lead to greater confusion. For another example, consider what might happen when you ask for directions to a friend’s home. Suppose that you’ve received these instructions: “Drive about a mile and then turn left at the traffic signal.” Now imagine that a few common problems exist in this simple message. First, suppose that your friend’s idea of “about a mile” differs from yours: Your mental picture of the

The reality of the other person is not in what he reveals to you, but in what he cannot reveal to you. Therefore, if you would understand him, listen not to what he says but rather to what he does not say.

—Kahlil Gibran
distance is actually closer to 2 miles, whereas your friend’s is closer to 300 yards. Next, consider that “traffic signal” really means “stop sign”; after all, it’s common for us to think one thing and say another. Keeping these problems in mind, suppose that you tried to verify your understanding of the directions by asking, “After I turn at the signal, how far should I go?” to which your friend replies that the house is the third from the corner. Clearly, if you parted after this exchange, you would encounter a lot of frustration before finding the elusive residence.

Because questioning doesn’t always provide the information you need, consider another kind of listening response—one that would tell you whether you understood what had already been said before you asked additional questions. This type of feedback involves restating in your own words the message you thought the speaker just sent, without adding anything new. Statements that reword the listener’s interpretation of a message are commonly termed **paraphrasing** or **active listening**. If the listener in the preceding scenario had offered this paraphrase—“You’re telling me to drive down to the traffic light by the high school and turn toward the mountains, is that it?”—it probably would have led the speaker to clarify the message.

The key to success in paraphrasing is to restate the other person’s comments in your own words as a way of cross-checking the information. If you simply repeat the other person’s comments verbatim, you will sound foolish—and you still might well be misunderstanding what has been said. Notice the difference between simply parroting a statement and true paraphrasing:

**Speaker:**  
I’d like to go, but I can’t afford it.

**Parroting:**  
You’d like to go, but you can’t afford it.

**Paraphrasing:**  
So if we could find a way to pay for you, you’d be willing to come. Is that right?

**Speaker:**  
You look awful!

**Parroting:**  
You think I look terrible.

**Paraphrasing:**  
Sounds like you think I’ve put on too much weight.

There are two levels at which you can paraphrase messages. The first involves paraphrasing factual information that will help you understand the other person’s ideas more clearly. At the most basic level, this sort of reflecting can prevent frustrating mixups: “So you want to meet this Tuesday, not next week, right?”

You can also paraphrase personal information: “So my joking makes you think I don’t care about your problem.” This sort of nondefensive response may be difficult when you are under attack, but it can short-circuit defensive arguments. Chapter 10 will explain in more detail how to use paraphrasing when you’re being criticized.

Paraphrasing personal information can also be a tool for helping others, as the In Real Life transcript on pages 252–253 shows. Reflecting the speaker’s thoughts and feelings (instead of judging or analyzing, for example) shows your involvement and concern. The nonevaluative nature of paraphrasing encourages the problem-holder to discuss the matter further. Reflecting thoughts and feelings allows the problem-holder to unload more of the concerns he or she has been carrying around, often leading to the relief that comes from catharsis. Finally, paraphrasing helps the problem-holder to sort out the problem. The clarity that comes from this sort of perspective can make it possible to find solutions that weren’t apparent before. These features make paraphrasing a vital skill in the human services professions, leadership training, and even hostage negotiation.
Effective paraphrasing is a skill that takes time to develop. You can make your paraphrasing sound more natural by taking any of three approaches, depending on the situation:

1. **Change the speaker’s wording:**

   **Speaker:** Bilingual education is just another failed idea of bleeding-heart liberals.

   **Paraphrase:** Let me see if I’ve got this right. You’re mad because you think bilingual ed sounds good, but it doesn’t work?

2. **Offer an example of what you think the speaker is talking about:**

   **Speaker:** Lee is such a jerk. I can’t believe the way he acted last night.

   **Paraphrase:** You think those jokes were pretty offensive, huh?

3. **Reflect the underlying theme of the speaker’s remarks:**

   **Paraphrase:** You keep reminding me to be careful. Sounds like you’re worried that something might happen to me. Am I right?
Paraphrasing won’t always be accurate. But expressing your restatement tentatively gives the other person a chance to make a correction. (Note how the examples end with questions in an attempt to confirm if the paraphrase was accurate.)

Because it’s an unfamiliar way of responding, paraphrasing may feel awkward at first; but if you start by paraphrasing occasionally and then gradually increase the frequency of such responses, you can begin to learn the benefits. You can begin practicing paraphrasing by trying the Skill Builder on page 254.

There are several factors to consider before you decide to paraphrase:

1. **Is the issue complex enough?** If you’re fixing dinner, and someone wants to know when it will be ready, it would be exasperating to hear, “You’re interested in knowing when we’ll be eating.”

2. **Do you have the necessary time and concern?** Paraphrasing can take a good deal of time. Therefore, if you’re in a hurry, it’s wise to avoid starting a conversation you won’t be able to finish. Even more important than time is concern. Paraphrasing that comes across as mechanical or insincere reflecting can do more harm than good.39
3. Can you withhold judgment? Use paraphrasing only if you are willing to focus on the speaker's message without injecting your own judgments. It can be tempting to rephrase others’ comments in a way that leads them toward the position you think is best without ever clearly stating your intentions.

4. Is your paraphrasing in proportion to other responses? Paraphrasing can become annoying when it's overused. This is especially true if you suddenly add this approach to your style. A far better way to use paraphrasing is to gradually introduce it into your repertoire.

**SUPPORTING**

There are times when other people want to hear more than a reflection of how they feel: They would like to know how you feel for and about them. Support reveals a listener’s solidarity with the speaker’s situation. One scholar describes supporting as “expressions of care, concern, affection, and interest, especially during times of stress or upset.”

There are several types of support:

**Empathizing**

“I can understand why you’d be upset about this.”

“Yeah, that class was tough for me, too.”

**Agreement**

“You’re right—the landlord is being unfair.”

“Sounds like the job is a perfect match for you.”

---

**SKILL BUILDER**

**Paraphrasing Practice**

This exercise will help you see that it is possible to understand someone who disagrees with you, without arguing or sacrificing your point of view.

1. Find a partner. Designate one person as A and the other as B.

2. Find a subject on which you and your partner apparently disagree—a current events topic, a philosophical or moral issue, or perhaps simply a matter of personal taste.

3. Person A begins by making a statement on the subject. Person B’s job is then to paraphrase the statement. B’s job is simply to understand here, and doing so in no way should signify agreement or disagreement with A’s remarks.

4. A then responds by telling B whether her response was accurate. If there was some misunderstanding, A should make the correction, and B should feed back her new understanding of the statement. Continue this process until you’re both sure that B understands A’s statement.

5. Now it’s B’s turn to respond to A’s statement and for A to help the process of understanding by correcting B.

6. Continue this process until each partner is satisfied that she has explained herself fully and has been understood by the other person.

7. Now discuss the following questions:
   a. How did your understanding of the speaker’s statement change after you used active listening?
   b. Did you find that the gap between your position and that of your partner narrowed as a result of active listening?
   c. How did you feel at the end of your conversation? How does this feeling compare to your usual feeling after discussing controversial issues?
   d. How might your life change if you used paraphrasing at home? At work? With friends?
Chapter 7  Listening: More Than Meets the Ear

**Offers to help**
“I’m here if you need me.”
“I’d be happy to study with you for the next test if you’d like.”

**Praise**
“Wow—you did a fantastic job!”
“You’re a terrific person, and if she doesn’t recognize it, that’s her problem!”

**Reassurance**
The worst part seems to be over. It will probably get easier from here.”
“I’m sure you’ll do a great job.”

There’s no question about the value of receiving comfort and support in the face of personal problems. One survey showed that “comforting ability” was among the most important communication skills a friend could have. The value of receiving support with personal problems is clear when big problems arise, but research shows that the smaller, everyday distresses and upsets can actually take a bigger toll on mental health and physical well-being. The research is clear: Receiving emotional support during times of stress is good for one’s health.

It’s easy to identify what effective support doesn’t sound like. Some scholars have called these messages “cold comfort.” See Table 7.2 on this page for real cold-comfort messages found in an online discussion. As these examples suggest, you’re probably not being supportive if you:

- Deny others the right to their feelings. Consider the stock remark “Don’t worry about it.” Although it may be intended as a reassuring comment, the underlying message is that the speaker wants the person to feel differently. The irony is that the suggestion probably won’t work—after all, it’s unlikely that people can or will stop worrying just because you tell them to do so. Research about such responses is clear: “Messages that explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, and legitimize the feelings and perspective of a distressed person are perceived as more helpful messages.”

| Table 7.2 |
| Cold Comfort: Messages That Don’t Help |
| Don’t take it so hard. She was a slut anyway. |
| That’s nothing! Want to hear how I got dumped? |
| I don’t know what you ever saw in him anyway. He’s ugly. You can do much better. |
| You know you had this coming—you were overdue for payback. |
| She/he was way too young (old) for you. |
| You can’t have everything you want in this life. |
| Now that it’s finally over, I can tell you she’s been cheating on you, dude! |
| He was just using you for sex. |
| She was always a jerk about you behind your back. Who needs that? |
| Now we’ll have more time to hang out together, just like we used to! |
| I’m so glad that this happened to you. I heard a story once about a guy whose significant other left him, and he begged and begged and begged for her to come back. Finally she did, and 20 years later she was a drug addict and committed suicide and left him with nothing but heartache. So you never know what you’re saved from. |


than those which only implicitly recognize or deny the feelings and perspective of the other.”

- **Minimize the significance of the situation.** Consider the times you’ve been told, “Hey, it’s only ______.” You can probably fill in the blank in a variety of ways: “a job,” “her opinion,” “a test,” “puppy love,” “a party.” To someone who has been the victim of verbal abuse, the hurtful message isn’t “just words”; to a child who didn’t get an invitation, it isn’t “just a party”; to a worker who has been chewed out by the boss, it isn’t “just a job.”

- **Focus on “then and there” rather than “here and now.”** Although it is sometimes true that “you’ll feel better tomorrow,” it sometimes isn’t. Even if the prediction that “ten years from now you won’t remember her name” proves correct, it provides little comfort to someone experiencing heartbreak today.

- **Cast judgment.** It usually isn’t encouraging to hear “You know, it’s your own fault—you really shouldn’t have done that” after you’ve confessed to making a poor decision. As you’ll learn in Chapter 10, evaluative and condescending statements are more likely to engender defensiveness than to help people change for the better.

- **Focus on yourself.** It can be tempting to talk at length about a similar experience you’ve encountered (“I know exactly how you feel. Something like that happened to me. . . .”). While your intent might be to show empathy, research shows that such messages aren’t perceived as helpful because they draw attention away from the distressed person.

- **Defend yourself.** When your response to others’ concerns is to defend yourself (“Don’t blame me; I’ve done my part”), it’s clear that you are more concerned with yourself than with supporting the other person.

How often do people fail to provide appropriate supportive responses? One survey of mourners who had recently suffered from the death of a loved one reported that 80 percent of the statements made to them were unhelpful. Nearly half of the “helpful” statements were advice: “You’ve got to get out more.” “Don’t question God’s will.” Despite their frequency, these suggestions were helpful only 3 percent of the time. The next most frequent response was reassurance, such as “She’s out of pain now.” Like advice, this kind of support was helpful only 3 percent of the time. Far more helpful were expressions that acknowledged the mourner’s feelings. (See the reading on page 257 for further discussion on allowing people to grieve.)

When handled correctly, supporting responses can be helpful. Guidelines for effective support include:

1. **Recognize that you can support another person’s struggles without approving of his or her decisions.** Suppose, for instance, that a friend has decided to quit a job that you think she should keep. You could still be supportive by saying, “I know you’ve given this a lot of thought and that you’re doing what you think is best.” Responses like this can provide face-saving support without compromising your principles.
Let Mourners Grieve

After a recent death in my family, I received a number of condolence cards that tried to talk me out of my grief. “You should be happy you have your memories,” wrote one friend. “You should feel lucky you got to be with your father in the hospital.” Lucky? Happy? You’ve got to be kidding!

I was 25 when I lost my father last fall. He was only 58, and his death from bone cancer was slow and excruciating. When I cry for my father, I cry for his suffering; I cry because he worked long, grueling hours to save for a retirement he never got to enjoy. I cry because my mother is alone. I cry because I have so much of my life ahead of me, and my father will miss everything. If I marry, if I have children, he won’t be there. My grief is profound: I am mourning the past, present and future. I resent the con- 
doence cards that hurry me through my grief, as if it were a dangerous street at night.

Why don’t people say “I am sorry for your loss” anymore? Why don’t people accept that after a parent’s death, there will be years of grief? People seem to worry that if they encourage me to grieve openly, I will fall apart. I won’t. On the contrary, if you allow me to be sad, I will be a stronger, more effective person.

Our society needs to rethink the way we communicate with mourners—especially since so many people are in mourning these days. Everyone wants mourners to “snap out of it” because observing another’s anguish isn’t easy to do. Here’s my advice: let mourners mourn.

Before I lost my father, I was just as guilty of finding the silver lining of people’s grief. If someone told me she lost her mother, I might say something like “She was sick for a very long time. It’s good she’s not suffering anymore.” When a mourner hears nothing but these “silver linings,” she begins to wonder why she can’t find the good in the situation the way everyone else can. People want her to smile and agree that it’s going to be OK, but she can’t.

Condolences are some of the most difficult words to write or say. So it’s natural that we freeze with writer’s block when faced with such an immense task. Here are my basic guidelines for mastering the Art of the Condolence:

- Always begin directly and simply. “I am so sorry about your mother’s death.”
- It’s better to ask “How are you?” or “How are you feeling?” instead of telling someone how she should feel.
- Never give advice about how someone should get through the loss. Some mourners go to parties; others stay home with the shades drawn. Be open to the mourner’s individual needs. Be open to the possibility that these needs will change day by day.
- If you want to offer something upbeat, share a funny anecdote or memory about the deceased that might bring a smile to the mourner’s face.

Grieving is private, but it can be public, too. We need to stop being afraid of public mourning. We need to be open to mourners. We need to look each other in the eye, and say “I am so sorry.”

Jess Decourcy Hinds

2. **Monitor the other person’s reaction to your support.** If it doesn’t seem to help, consider other types of responses that let him or her explore the issue.

3. **Realize that support may not always be welcome.** In one survey, some people reported occasions when social support wasn’t necessary because they felt capable of handling the problem themselves. Many regarded uninvited support as an intrusion, and some said it left them feeling more nervous than before. The majority of respondents expressed a preference for being in control of whether their distressing situation should be discussed with even the most helpful friend.

**ANALYZING**

When **analyzing**, the listener offers an interpretation of a speaker’s message. Analyses like these are probably familiar to you:
Yesterday a friend related something that someone had done to her. I told her why I thought the person acted the way he had and she became very upset and started arguing with me. Now, the reason is clear. I had been listening to her words and had paid no attention to her feelings. Her words had described how terribly this other person had treated her, but her emotions had been saying, “Please understand how I felt. Please accept my feeling the way I did.” The last thing she wanted to hear from me was an explanation of the other person’s behavior.

—Hugh Prather

“I think what’s really bothering you is . . .”
“She’s doing it because . . .”
“I don’t think you really meant that.”
“Maybe the problem started when she . . .”

Interpretations are often effective ways to help people with problems to consider alternative meanings—meanings they would have never thought of without your help. Sometimes a clear analysis will make a confusing problem suddenly clear, either suggesting a solution or at least providing an understanding of what is occurring.

In other cases, an analysis can create more problems than it solves. There are two potential problems with analyzing. First, your interpretation may not be correct, in which case the speaker may become even more confused by accepting it. Second, even if your analysis is correct, telling it to the problem-holder might not be useful. There’s a chance that it will arouse defensiveness (because analysis implies superiority). Even if it doesn’t, the person may not be able to understand your view of the problem without working it out personally.

How can you know when it’s helpful to offer an analysis? There are several guidelines to follow:

• **Offer your interpretation as tentative rather than as absolute fact.** There’s a big difference between saying “Maybe the reason is . . .” or “The way it looks to me . . .” and insisting, “This is the truth.”

• **You ought to be sure that the other person will be receptive to your analysis.** Even if you’re completely accurate, your thoughts won’t help if the problem-holder isn’t ready to consider them.

• **Be sure that your motive for offering an analysis is truly to help the other person.** It can be tempting to offer an analysis to show how brilliant you are or even to make the other person feel bad for not having thought of the right answer in the first place. Needless to say, an analysis offered under such conditions isn’t helpful.

**ADVISING**

When we are approached with another’s problem, a common tendency is to respond with **advising** to help by offering a solution. Advice can sometimes be helpful, as long as it’s given in a respectful, caring way. Despite its apparent value, advice has its limits. Research has shown that it is actually **unhelpful** at least as often as it’s helpful. Studies on advice-giving offer the following important considerations when trying to help others:

• **Is the advice needed?** If the person has already taken a course of action, giving advice after the fact (“I can’t believe you got back together with him”) is rarely appreciated.
• *Is the advice wanted?* People generally don’t value unsolicited advice. It’s usually best to ask if the speaker is interested in hearing your counsel. Remember that sometimes people just want a listening ear, not solutions to their problems.

• *Is the advice given in the right sequence?* Advice is more likely to be received after the listener first offers supporting, paraphrasing, and questioning responses to better understand the speaker and the situation.

• *Is the advice coming from an expert?* If you want to offer advice about anything from car purchasing to relationship managing, it’s important to have experience and success in those matters. If you don’t have expertise, it’s a good idea to offer the speaker supportive responses, then encourage that person to seek out expert counsel.

• *Is the advisor a close and trusted person?* Although sometimes we seek out advice from people we don’t know well (perhaps because they have expertise), in most cases...
cases we value advice given within the context of a close and ongoing interpersonal relationship.

- **Is the advice offered in a sensitive, face-saving manner?** No one likes to feel bossed or belittled, even if the advice is good. Remember that messages have both content and relational dimensions, and sometimes the unstated relational messages when giving advice (“I’m smarter than you”; “You’re not bright enough to figure this out yourself”) will keep people from hearing counsel.54

## Judging

A **judging** response evaluates the sender’s thoughts or behaviors in some way. The judgment may be favorable—“That’s a good idea” or “You’re on the right track now”—or unfavorable—“An attitude like that won’t get you anywhere.” But in either case it implies that the person doing the judging is in some way qualified to pass judgment on the speaker’s thoughts or actions.

Sometimes negative judgments are purely critical. How many times have you heard such responses as “Well, you asked for it!” or “I told you so!” or “You’re just feeling sorry for yourself”? Although responses like these can sometimes serve as a verbal slap that brings problem-holders to their senses, they usually make matters worse.

In other cases, negative judgments are less critical. These involve what we usually call **constructive criticism**, which is intended to help the problem-holder improve in the future. This is the sort of response given by friends about everything from the choice

### INVITATION TO INSIGHT

**What Would You Say?**

1. In each situation below, describe what you would say in response to the problem being shared:

   a. My family doesn’t understand me. Everything I like seems to go against their values, and they just won’t accept my feelings as being right for me. It’s not that they don’t love me—they do. But they don’t accept me.

   b. I’ve been pretty discouraged lately. I just can’t get a good relationship going with any guys. I’ve got plenty of male friends, but that’s always as far as it goes. I’m tired of being just a pal... I want to be more than that.

   c. (Child to parents) I hate you guys! You always go out and leave me with some stupid sitter. Why don’t you like me?

   d. I don’t know what I want to do with my life. I’m tired of school, but there aren’t any good jobs around. I could just drop out for a while, but that doesn’t really sound very good, either.

   e. Things really seem to be kind of lousy in my marriage lately. It’s not that we fight much, but all the excitement seems to be gone. We’re in a rut, and it keeps getting worse... .

   f. I keep getting the idea that my boss is angry at me. It seems as if lately he hasn’t been joking around very much, and he hasn’t said anything at all about my work for about three weeks now. I wonder what I should do.

2. After you’ve written your response to each of these messages, imagine the probable outcome of the conversation that would have followed. If you’ve tried this exercise in class, you might have two group members role-play each response. Based on your idea of how the conversation might have gone, decide which responses were productive and which were unproductive.
of clothing to jobs to friends. Another common setting for constructive criticism occurs in school, where instructors evaluate students’ work to help them master concepts and skills. But whether it’s justified or not, even constructive criticism runs the risk of arousing defensiveness, because it may threaten the self-concept of the person at whom it is directed (we’ll discuss this further in Chapter 10).

Judgments have the best chance of being received when two conditions exist:

1. **The person with the problem should have requested an evaluation from you.** Occasionally an unsolicited evaluation may bring someone to his or her senses, but more often an unsolicited evaluation will trigger a defensive response.

2. **The intent of your judgment should be genuinely constructive and not designed as a put-down.** If you are tempted to use judgments as a weapon, don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are being helpful. Often the statement “I’m telling you this for your own good . . .” simply isn’t true.

Now that you’re aware of all the possible listening responses, try the exercise on page 260 to see how you might use them in everyday situations.

**CHOOSING THE BEST LISTENING RESPONSE**

By now you can see that there are many ways to respond as a listener. Research shows that, in the right circumstances, all response styles can help others accept their situation, feel better, and have a sense of control over their problems. But there is enormous variability in which style will work with a given person. This fact explains why communicators who use a wide variety of response styles are usually more effective than those who use just one or two styles. However, there are other factors to consider when choosing how to respond to a speaker.

**GENDER** Research shows that men and women differ in the ways they listen and respond to others. Women are more likely than men to give supportive responses when presented with another person’s problem, are more skillful at composing such messages, and are more likely to seek out such responses from listeners. By contrast, men are less skillful at providing emotional support to those who are distressed, and they’re more likely to respond to others’ problems by offering advice or by diverting the topic. In a study of helping styles in sororities and fraternities, researchers found that sorority women frequently respond with emotional support when asked to help; also, they rated their sisters as being better at listening nonjudgmentally and on comforting and showing concern for them. Fraternity men, on the other hand, fit the stereotypical pattern of offering help by challenging their brothers to evaluate their attitudes and values.

The temptation when hearing these facts is to conclude that in times of distress, women want support and men want advice—but research doesn’t bear that out. Numerous studies show that both men and women prefer and want supportive, endorsing messages in difficult situations. The fact that women are more adept at creating and delivering such messages explains why both males and females tend to seek out women listeners when they want emotional support. When it comes to gender, it’s important to remember that while men and women sometimes use different response styles, they all need a listening ear.

**THE SITUATION** Sometimes people need your advice. At other times, people need encouragement and support, and in still other cases your analysis or judgment will be most helpful. And, as you have seen, sometimes your probes and paraphrasing can
They Aid Customers by Becoming Good Listeners

Do you need someone to listen to your troubles?

Have your hair done. Beauty salon chairs may be to today's women what conversation-centered backyard fences were to their grandmothers and psychiatrists' couches are to their wealthier contemporaries.

"We are not as family-oriented as our ancestors were," says counselor-trainer Andy Thompson. "They listened to and helped each other. Now that we have become a society of individuals isolated from one another by cars, telephones, jobs and the like, we have had to find other listeners." Community training program director for Crisis House, Thompson has designed and is conducting human relations training sessions for workers to whom customers tend to unburden their woes most frequently—cosmetologists, bartenders and cabdrivers.

"People can definitely help others just by letting them talk," he said. "Relatives, friends or spouses who listen do a lot to keep the mental health of this country at a reasonable rate. Workers in situations that encourage communications can make the same meaningful contribution."

Thompson explained that his training is not meant to replace, or be confused with, professional treatment or counseling. His students fill a gap between family and professionals.

"There are not enough psychiatrists or psychologists to go around," he said. "And some professionals become so technical that their help doesn’t mean much to persons who just need someone who will let them get problems and questions out in the open where they can look at them."

Thompson’s first course of training, completed recently, was for cosmetologists. The human relations training program attempts to make the most of these built-in assets by using a method Thompson calls "reflective listening."

"The purpose is to let the customer talk enough to clarify her own thinking," he said. "We are not interested in having cosmetologists tell women what to do, but to give them a chance to choose their own course of action."

"There is a tendency among listeners to try to rescue a person with problems and pull them out of negative situations. People don’t really want that. They just want to discuss what is on their minds and reach their own conclusions."

Cosmetologists are taught to use phrases that aid customers in analyzing their thoughts. Some of the phrases are, "You seem to think . . ." "You sound like . . ." "You appear to be . . ." "As I get it, you . . ." and "It must seem to you that . . ." There also are barriers to conversation that the cosmetologists are taught to avoid.

"A constant bombardment of questions can disrupt communications," Thompson said. "Commands will have the same effect. Many of them are impossible to follow anyway."

"How many can respond to orders to ‘Stop feeling depressed,’ ‘Don’t be so upset,’ or ‘Don’t think about it.’"

"The same applies to negative criticism, ‘That’s dumb,’ for instance, and evaluations, such as ‘Oh, you’re just confused.’"

"Comments that seem threatening—‘You had better stop feeling sad,’ as an example—will end a conversation as quickly as changing the subject or not paying attention."

San Diego Union
help people find their own answers. In other words, a competent communicator needs to analyze the situation and develop an appropriate response. As a rule of thumb, it’s often wise to begin with responses that seek understanding and offer a minimum of direction, such as prompting, questioning, paraphrasing, and supporting. Once you’ve gathered the facts and demonstrated your interest and concern, it’s likely that the speaker will be more receptive to (and perhaps even ask for) your analyzing, advising, and evaluating responses.

THE OTHER PERSON Besides considering the situation, you should also consider the other person when deciding which style to use. Some people are able to consider advice thoughtfully, whereas others use advice to avoid making their own decisions. Many communicators are extremely defensive and aren’t capable of receiving analysis or judgments without lashing out. Still others aren’t equipped to think through problems clearly enough to profit from paraphrasing and probing. Sophisticated listeners choose a style that fits the person. One way to determine the most appropriate response is to ask the speaker what she or he wants from you. A simple question such as “Are you looking for my advice, or do you just want a listening ear right now?” can help you give others the kinds of responses they’re looking for.

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

Unconditional Positive Regard

Carl Rogers was the best-known advocate of paraphrasing as a helping tool. As a psychotherapist, Rogers focused on how professionals can help others, but he and his followers were convinced that the same approach can work in all interpersonal relationships.

Rogers used several terms to describe his approach. Sometimes he labeled it “nondirective,” sometimes “client-centered,” and at other times “person-centered.” All of these terms reflect his belief that the best way to help another is to offer a supportive climate in which the people seeking help can find their own answers. Rogers believed that advising, judging, analyzing, and questioning are not the best ways to help others solve their problems. Instead, Rogers and his followers were convinced that people are basically good and that they can improve without receiving any guidance from others, after they accept and respect themselves.

An essential ingredient for person-centered helping is what Rogers called “unconditional positive regard.” This attitude requires the helper to treat the speaker’s ideas respectfully and nonjudgmentally. Unconditional positive regard means accepting others for who they are, even when you don’t approve of their posture toward life. Treating a help-seeker with unconditional positive regard doesn’t oblige you to agree with everything the help-seeker thinks, feels, or does, but it does oblige you to suspend judgment about the rightness or wrongness of the help-seeker’s thoughts and actions.

A person-centered approach to helping places heavy demands on the listener. At the skill level, it demands an ability to reflect the speaker’s thoughts and feelings perceptively and accurately. Even more difficult, though, is the challenge of listening and responding without passing judgment on the speaker’s ideas or behavior.

Unconditional positive regard is especially hard when we are faced with the challenge of listening and responding to someone whose beliefs, attitudes, and values differ profoundly from our own. This approach requires the helper to follow the scriptural injunction of loving the sinner while hating the sin. One of the best models of this approach is illustrated in the movie Dead Man Walking. (See the description of this movie on page 267.)

YOUR PERSONAL STYLE  Finally, consider yourself when deciding how to respond. Most of us reflexively use one or two response styles. You may be best at listening quietly, offering a prompt from time to time. Or perhaps you are especially insightful and can offer a truly useful analysis of the problem. Of course, it’s also possible to rely on a response style that is unhelpful. You may be overly judgmental or too eager to advise, even when your suggestions aren’t invited or productive. As you think about how to respond to another’s messages, consider both your strengths and weaknesses and adapt accordingly.

MAKING THE GRADE

Summary

Listening is the most common—and perhaps the most overlooked—form of communication. There is a difference between hearing and listening, and there is also a difference between mindless and mindful listening. Listening, defined as the process of making sense of others’ spoken messages, consists of five elements: hearing, attending, understanding, responding, and remembering.

Several responding styles masquerade as listening but actually are only poor imitations of the real thing. We listen poorly for a variety of reasons. Some reasons have to do with the tremendous number of messages that bombard us daily and with the personal preoccupations, noise, and rapid thoughts that distract us from focusing on the information we are exposed to. Another set of reasons has to do with the considerable effort involved in listening carefully and the mistaken belief that there are more rewards in speaking than in listening. A few listeners fail to receive messages because of physical hearing defects; others listen poorly because of lack of training. Some keys to better listening are to talk less, reduce distractions, avoid making premature judgments, and seek the speaker’s key ideas.

Listening responses are the primary way we evaluate whether and how others are paying attention to us. Some listening responses put a premium on gathering information and providing support; these include prompting, questioning, paraphrasing, and supporting. Other listening responses focus more on providing direction and evaluation: analyzing, advising, and judging. The most effective communicators use a variety of these styles, taking into consideration factors such as gender, the situation at hand, the person with the problem, and their own personal style.
Key Terms

advising (258)  
ambushing (243)  
analyzing (257)  
attending (240)  
counterfeit questions (249)  
defensive listening (243)  
insensitive listening (243)  
insulated listening (243)  
judging (260)  
listening (237)  
listening fidelity (240)  
mindful listening (238)  
mindless listening (237)  
paraphrasing (251)  
prompting (247)  
pseudolistening (242)  
questioning (249)  
remembering (241)  
responding (240)  
selective listening (242)  
sincere questions (249)  
stage-hogging (242)  
supporting (254)  
understanding (240)

Online Resources

Now that you have read this chapter, use your Premium Website for Looking Out/Looking In for quick access to the electronic resources that accompany this text. Your Premium Website gives you access to:

- **Study tools** that will help you assess your learning and prepare for exams (digital glossary, key term flash cards, review quizzes).

- **Activities and assignments** that will help you hone your knowledge, understand how theory and research applies to your own life (Invitation to Insight), consider ethical challenges in interpersonal communication (Ethical Challenge), and build your interpersonal communication skills throughout the course (Skill Builder). If requested, you can submit your answers to your instructor.

- **Media resources** that will allow you to watch and critique news video and videos of interpersonal communication situations (In Real Life, interpersonal video simulations) and download a chapter review so you can study when and where you’d like (Audio Study Tools).

This chapter’s key terms and search terms for additional reading are featured in this end-of-chapter section, and you can find this chapter’s Invitation to Insight, Ethical Challenge, Skill Builder, and In Real Life activities in the body of the chapter.

Search Terms

When searching online databases to research topics in this chapter, use the following terms (along with this chapter’s key terms) to maximize the chances of finding useful information:

attention  
communication fidelity  
compassion  
comprehension  
empathy  
conversation  
memory
Film and Television

You can see the communication principles described in this chapter portrayed in the following films and television programs:

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

**CSI** and **Law & Order** (2000– and 1990– ) Both Rated TV-14

The crime shows *CSI* and *Law & Order* have become a fixture of television programming. In their many forms, these franchises have one thing in common: Their main characters must engage in active listening to do their jobs effectively. Sometimes a lawyer uses prompting and support to draw out a difficult confession. Other times a private investigator asks probing questions and offers analyzing responses to arrive at important conclusions. In still other instances, a police officer carefully attends to and remembers specific details during a testimony, which later helps solve a case. And in a variety of situations, the characters offer advising and judging responses to their clients, colleagues, and coworkers. Watch an episode of one of these programs and see how many of the listening responses from pages 247–261 you can observe. Chances are, you’ll find quite a few.

INEFFECTIVE LISTENING


Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) is every employee’s nightmare. She’s a self-centered, domineering, hard-driven boss who treats the people who work for her like slaves. Priestly offers a tour de force of every poor listening habit. She attends only to things that matter to her ("The details of your incompetence do not interest me") and does so insensitively ("Bore someone else with your questions"). Pseudolistening, defensive listening, and stage-hogging? She does them all. She also interrupts, rolls her eyes when she doesn’t like what she’s hearing, and walks out on her subordinates in mid-conversation. Priestly may be a successful businesswoman, but she fails on many other counts—especially as a listener.

SUPPORTIVE LISTENING

**In Treatment** (2008– ) Rated TV-MA

This HBO series follows therapist Paul (Gabriel Byrne) as he meets with a variety of clients. They include a young doctor with a confused romantic life, a cocky fighter
pilot who left sixteen Iraqi children dead in a bombing mission, a teenage gymnast who may have attempted suicide, and a couple struggling to keep their marriage alive. Weekly episodes also track Paul's visits with his own therapist (Dianne Wiest).

Paul's therapeutic manner includes all of the listening responses described in this chapter. His genuine regard for each client and his skill shows that these response styles don't need to sound formulaic, and that they can indeed be helpful.

**Dead Man Walking** (1995) Rated R

Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) is a nun who serves in an inner-city neighborhood. She receives a letter from death row inmate Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) and decides to visit him in prison. He fits the profile for everything she is not: uneducated, angry, bigoted, rude, and insecure. Nonetheless, Sister Helen agrees to help Poncelet appeal his murder conviction and death sentence—and her world turns upside down.

Sister Helen’s highest goal is to get Matthew to take responsibility for his actions and to come to peace with God, the murder victims’ parents, and himself. She does this not by pushing or persuading, but by giving him her time and her ear. In their early meetings, Prejean comes with no agenda; she tells Poncelet, “I'm here to listen. Whatever you want to talk about is fine with me.” She asks open-ended questions and allows Poncelet to arrive at his own conclusions. He admits to being surprised that she “didn’t come down here preaching fire and brimstone,” so he slowly opens his life to her.

As time goes on, Sister Helen comes to realize that Poncelet is, indeed, guilty of the awful crimes for which he has been convicted. Her pain is obvious as she confronts the grieving families of his victims, none of whom can understand or accept why she is willing to help a murderer. What they don’t appreciate is that she never wavers in her abhorrence for his deeds, but she remains steadfast in separating her hate for the crime from her concern and love for Poncelet. As such, she provides viewers with proof that unconditional positive regard can be achieved, and can heal.
CHAPTER 7

Pg. 236: Poem “Conversations” from Dragonflies, Codfish & Frogs by Ric Masten. Copyright (c) Sunflower Ink, Palo Colorado Road, Carmel, CA 93923. Reprinted with permission.


Pg. 241: “Learning to Listen in Prison” by Bonnie Motsch. Used with permission of author.


Pg. 250: From Communication: The Transfer of Meaning by Don Fabun. Used by permission of Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA.

Pg. 257: Newsweek, “I’m Sorry! Shouldn’t Be the Hardest Words,” May 28, 2007, p. 20. Copyright © 2007 Newsweek, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Pg. 263: From “They Learn to Aid Their Customers by Becoming Good Listeners” by Beth Mohr. From the San Diego Union © 1976. Reprinted with permission.

CHAPTER 8

Pg. 274: Newsweek.com, “A Geek Love Story,” by Jessica Bennett, 4/14/09. Copyright © 2009 Newsweek, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Pg. 276 Figure 8.1: From Mark L. Knapp & Anita L. Vengelisti, Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships, 2nd ed. Published by Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA. Copyright © 1992 by Pearson Education. Adapted by permission of the publisher.


CHAPTER 9

Pg. 306: From The New York Times, Health section, “Friends with Benefits, and Stress Too,” Benedict Carey, October 2, 2007. Copyright (c) 2007 The New York Times. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of the material without express written permission is prohibited.

Pg. 309: “Culture, Gender, and Self-Disclosure” by Lexie Lopez-Mayo. Used with permission of author.


Pg. 318: Poem “Looking Out/Looking In” from Stark Naked by Ric Masten. Copyright (c) Sunflower Ink, Palo Colorado Road, Carmel, CA 93923. Reprinted with permission.

Pg. 319: Boston Globe, “Secret Website Gets a Million Hits a Week,” Courtney R. Brooks, October 23, 2007. Copyright (c) 2007 The Boston Globe. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

Pg. 329: From “Is Midleading Your Spouse Fraud or Tact” by Maria Cone, Los Angeles Times, April 11, 1993. Reprinted by permission of Tribune Media Services.

CHAPTER 10


Pg. 353: From “How to Argue Effectively” by Dave Barry. Dave Barry is a syndicated humor columnist with The Miami Herald. Used with permission.

CHAPTER 11


Pg. 402 Figure 11.2: Copyright (c) 1990 Adapted from “Teaching and Learning Skills of Interpersonal Confrontation” by Rory Remer and Paul deMesquita, in Intimates in Conflict: A Communication Perspective edited by Cahn, p. 227. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc.
CHAPTER ONE


70. The following discussion is based on material in D. E. Hamachek (1992). Encounters with the Self, 3rd ed. (pp. 24–26). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt.


83. O’Sullivan, op. cit.

CHAPTER THREE


26. For descriptions of various psychological disorders and their treatments, visit the National Institute of Mental Health website at http://www.nimh.nih.gov/.


41. For a review of these perceptual biases, see Hamachek, Encounters with the Self. See also Bradbury & Fincham, op. cit. For an example of the self-serving bias in action, see R. Buttny (1997). “Reported Speech in Talking Race on Campus.” Human Communication Research, 23, 477–506.


49. See, for example, A. Sillars, W. Shellen, A. McIntosh, & M. Pomegranate (1997). “Relational Characteristics of


---

**CHAPTER FOUR**


16. Shaver et al., op. cit.


28. Ibid., p. 176. See also Gallois, op. cit.


40. Ibid.
53. Goleman, Social Intelligence, op. cit., p. 115.


**CHAPTER FIVE**


38. R. F. Proctor & J. R. Wilco (1993). “An Exploratory Analysis of Responses to Owned Messages in Inter-


50. Clark, op. cit.

Endnotes


Endnotes


80. Ibid.


90. For a summary, see Knapp & Hall, op. cit., pp. 93–132.


CHAPTER SEVEN


13. Burgoon et al., op. cit.


54. Miczo & Burgoon, op. cit.


56. Clark & Delia, op. cit.


CHAPTER EIGHT


34. Johnson et al., op. cit.


48. Johnson et al., op. cit.


102. Watzlawick et al., op. cit.


CHAPTER NINE


13. See, for example, K. Floyd, op. cit.


CHAPTER TEN


Endnotes


24. Ibid., p. 36.


CHAPTER ELEVEN


18. Wilmot & Hocker, op. cit., p. 159.


Copyright 2010 Cengage Learning, Inc. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.
57. The following research is summarized in Tannen, op. cit., p. 160.
58. Collier, op. cit.
CHAPTER ONE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER TWO, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER THREE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FOUR, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FIVE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FIVE, “ON NAMING BABY”

CHAPTER FIVE, “COMPUTER PROGRAM DETECTS AUTHOR GENDER”

CHAPTER SIX, ON THE JOB
CHAPTER SEVEN, ON THE JOB


CHAPTER EIGHT, ON THE JOB


CHAPTER NINE, “FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS, AND STRESS TOO”


CHAPTER NINE, ON THE JOB


CHAPTER TEN, ON THE JOB


CHAPTER TEN, “TYPES OF DEFENSIVE REACTIONS”


CHAPTER ELEVEN, ON THE JOB


