

A Guide to understanding and coping with common mental health issues.

Issues covered in this guide include:

- Warning Signs of a Mental Health Crisis
- Coping With Anxiety
- Coping With Depression
- Coping With Stress
- Coping With Bullying & Cyber-bullying
- Active Listening and how it can help

Help And Assistance

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family get immediate support and information 24/7 by FreeTexting **HELP** to **50015**. Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit.

For information on Emergency Contacts, National Helplines, Local Support Groups and your nearest Places of Safety visit www.ineedhelp.ie

Always call 999 if someone is seriously ill or injured, and their life is at risk.

Gardaí / Ambulance / Fire call 999 or 112

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What *is*

ACTIVE LISTENING

and How Can It Help?



COPING WITH DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND STRESS
Short guides to coping with common mental health issues

What *is*

ACTIVE LISTENING

and How Can It Help?

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Active listening is a way of listening that ensures you are fully committed to hearing what someone else has to say. Learning how to actively listen is particularly beneficial when talking about sensitive or difficult subjects, as those who talk to you will feel valued and heard.

In this article we will look in more detail at what active listening is, how it can help, and how you can develop this skill.

What is Active Listening?

Sometimes when we listen to someone else, we might be distracted by the TV, busy tidying up, or replying to a text at the same time. Although you might hear what the other person is saying, it is much harder to take it in properly and respond in a meaningful way.

Active listening involves giving another person your full attention while they are speaking, so that you can digest what they say and respond thoughtfully. When you listen more attentively, the person speaking knows that you are invested in what they have to say, and this may mean that they feel able to open up to you more. It can also help to strengthen your friendship or relationship and bring you closer to each other.

Sometimes people shy away from listening too closely, as they fear that they will not know what to say or what the 'correct' opinion or advice would be. However, active listening requires you not to give advice or your opinion. With this in mind, try not to worry about your response. It is the act of listening that is reassuring and needed.

Who Can Be an Active Listener?

Although many professionals, including counsellors, doctors and therapists, use active listening, this skill can be developed by anyone! Active listening is something that you can practice each time someone talks to you, so that gradually over time your skills become strengthened.



What Are the Benefits of Active Listening?

Although you might be keen to learn about active listening to support one particular person, once you have acquired this skill you will find that it can be used positively in many situations.

Friendships and Relationships

In friendships, personal and family relationships, being able to actively listen shows those you are close to that you care about their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Being there for someone when they need a friend can strengthen your relationship.

Employment

If you have a part-time job, knowing how to actively listen will help you to form professional relationships with your colleagues. It can be daunting to take your first steps in employment, but showing that you will listen to your colleagues' thoughts for effective collaboration can prove you to be a real asset to the workplace.

Socialising

When you meet new people or spend time with friends, being an active listener will help you to improve your conversation skills. You may feel more confident in getting to know new people, asking questions, or paying attention to the clues body language might give you.

The Characteristics of Good Active Listening

A good active listener will:

- Listen more than they talk
- Be compassionate
- Try to be available to talk whenever needed, or suggest an alternative time if necessary
- Not shy away from painful feelings
- Assure someone that they can speak in confidence
- Accept what someone else says
- Empathise.



A good active listener will not:

- Offer opinions or make judgments
- Belittle someone else's concerns
- Patronise
- Probe into what someone else is thinking
- Give advice
- Offer platitudes such as "it will all be ok"
- Say "I know how you feel"
- Fail to pay attention
- Express shock or surprise
- Talk about their own problems.



How to Be a Good Active Listener

Despite its fancy sounding name, active listening doesn't have to mean doing anything complicated. Here are our top tips for getting to grips with active listening.

1. Maintain eye contact

If someone is talking to you, they will know you are listening if you are looking at them. This doesn't mean you need to stare, but facing them and paying attention will show that you are interested in what they have to say.

2. Don't interrupt

It may be hard for your friend or relative to say everything they need to, and there may be long pauses in their speech. It can be tempting to try to fill the silence, but if you remain quiet, you will probably find that they will continue talking when they are ready.

By resisting the urge to talk, the conversation will not become side-tracked before your friend has had chance to say everything they need to. It also shows that you are willing to wait for them to feel ready to speak.



3. Use gentle encouragement

If a period of silence feels unnatural, or you feel the need to respond, you can use gentle encouragement to show that you are listening. Nodding your head, smiling or making gentle noises such as “uh huh” or “mmm” all show that you are listening without the risk of interrupting their thoughts.

If your friend becomes side-tracked, it may seem that the rest of the conversation will be lost. You can help them get back to the important topic with encouraging sentences such as “we were talking about...”.

4. Pay attention to non-verbal cues

Sometimes body language can tell you more than words. Active listening involves paying attention to someone’s posture, such as being slumped, appearing tense, or having their arms crossed. They may also appear tearful, angry or exhausted. These cues can all give you clues about how they are feeling.

5. Don’t judge or assume

Try to focus only on what is being said, rather than your opinion of what you are hearing. Jumping to conclusions can lead to a negative outcome. If you can withhold judgement, your friend will be able to express themselves fully, and your initial assumptions may be proven wrong anyway.

6. Don’t impose opinions

Your friend may not be looking for your opinion. Often, people simply want to get things off their chest rather than being showered with advice. If your friend doesn’t seem to want advice, but just needs to offload their thoughts, it is best to keep your opinions to yourself.

7. Stay focused

Ignore all other distractions, such as your phone or the TV, and focus on your friend. If you are finding it hard to concentrate, try to repeat what they have said to make it clearer in your mind. This might feel awkward at first. You can ask your friend, “so, can I just check I understand properly”, and then paraphrase what they have said. This is a great way to show you have been paying attention, while also checking that you haven’t misunderstood.

8. Don’t get distracted planning a response

If you get caught up trying to think about what you can say to your friend, the chances are you’re not actively listening. Forget trying to respond, and focus only on what they are saying. You can use gentle encouragement to keep the conversation going.

9. Ask questions

If you are unsure what your friend means, ask a relevant question or see if they can clarify. It is ok to say, “I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” as this shows your friend that you do want to understand. It is also helpful to use open questions that will help your friend to elaborate, such as “how do you feel about that?”.

10. Summarise

Once it seems that your friend has said everything they need to, you should not try to give advice or offer your opinion. You can summarise by saying “it sounds like you feel that...”. If you have got anything wrong, your friend can correct you.

The more you practice active listening, the better you will become at it.

In many cases, advice is not wanted. However, if your friend is looking for help and you are unsure what to say, you can offer to support them by helping them to speak to a teacher, or in contacting a counsellor or their doctor.



How Can I Demonstrate I Am Actively Listening to My Child?

Even if you show all of the above active listening qualities, there are some additional things you can do to show your child that you are listening to them properly.

- Come quietly into their world, and allow them to be themselves. Don't try to change them, sometimes simply sitting with them is enough.
- Try very hard to understand what they are saying, even if it doesn't seem to make much sense at first.
- Take note of their point of view, even if you strongly disagree with it.
- Allow your child to make a decision, even if you think it may not be the right one (unless it will endanger them).
- Don't try to take the problem away from them, but support them in dealing with it in their own way.
- Try not to give advice, actively listening is enough.
- Don't offer religious advice unless it is asked for.
- Give your child enough space to make their own discoveries, rather than trying to educate them.
- If your child thanks you for listening, tell them you are glad they spoke to you and that you could be helpful.

Is There Anything I Should Avoid When Listening to My Child?

Your child may feel that you are not listening to them when any of the following occurs:

- You interrupt them before they have finished talking.
- You have a solution or advice to every issue.
- You talk about your own experiences of a similar (or different) issue.
- You talk about an issue that belittles your child's concern, or make a comment such as "some teenagers are far less fortunate than you".
- You criticise your child's speech, accent or grammar.
- You are not fully focused on the conversation, and may be busy doing another chore or looking at your phone.
- You refuse your child's thanks by saying "I haven't done anything".

Final Thoughts

Active listening is a skill that is helpful for conversations that may occur between friends, parents and children, when meeting new people, or in professional situations. Active listening also reduces the chance that someone will feel that you are not paying attention or have your own agenda.

It takes time to learn how to listen attentively, but once you start developing this skill you will find that you are able to have more in depth, constructive, and meaningful conversations.



Help and Assistance

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- Local Support Groups
- Directions to your nearest GP or out of hours clinic
- Directions to your nearest safe place or refuge

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About Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland

Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland was founded in 2007 as there were no national charities focusing specifically on the problems and issues of youth suicide and self-harm in Ireland. We now provide a range of services aimed at mental health awareness and suicide prevention amongst teenagers.



We run our “Four Steps to Help” Programme for schools and colleges around Ireland which provides Zoom workshops. We also have a video workshop presented by John Sharpson that any organisation can book through our website at schools.yspi.ie/video.php We provide a wide range of free information including our “Let’s Talk About Mental Health” magazine delivered to schools and organisations as well as the “Coping With” series of mental health guides.

We also operate a **24/7 FreeText Crisis Information Service** and fund a Youth Crisis Counselling Service.

Full details are available at www.yspi.ie

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