



Session 4

Handout 4: Active listening principles

Listening is an interactive, engaging process whereby the listener focuses attention on the person to whom he/she is speaking.

- The listener attempts to understand and interpret the non-verbal and verbal messages.
- The listener uses verbal and non-verbal techniques to convey support and communicate that he/she has heard and understood the message.
- Active listening is central to communication.

Types of questions

These types of questions are appropriate for eliciting relevant information:

Open-ended questions

An open-ended question is broad in scope and does not limit the area of inquiry.

For example: “What difficulties are you having?”

- Open-ended questions elicit more information than the other types of question.
- It is helpful to start interactions with open-ended questions and then, depending on the answers, move to focused and closed questions.

Focused questions

The listener defines the area of inquiry but allows considerable latitude in answering.

For example: “Can you tell me about your visit to the doctor?”

Closed questions

These questions require a “yes” or “no” or a numerical answer.

For example: “How long have you been experiencing trouble sleeping?”

The following types of questions should be avoided, as they usually elicit insufficient or inaccurate information:

Leading questions

The listener leads the speaker into a particular acceptable answer.

For example: “You agree that getting some professional help is the only way you’re going to start feeling better, don’t you?”

Compound questions

Two or more questions are asked without time given for the speaker to respond to the previous question in the series.



For example: “Tell me, have you decided on the model of care you want and whether you want to breastfeed?”

Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication norms vary across settings and cultures. These guidelines may be helpful to get you to start thinking about what is appropriate in your setting.

Sitting posture

- Sitting at the same level as the speaker can open the conversation.
- Crossed arms and legs can signal less involvement. An open posture shows an openness to the speaker and to what she or he has to say.
- A slight inclination toward a person can convey, “I am with you. I am interested in what you have to say.”

Eye contact

- Norms about eye contact vary across contexts. Let your context be your guide on eye contact.
- Frequent and soft eye contact makes the patient feel that the provider is being attentive.
- The provider should not make as frequent eye contact during the initial session, but the level of eye contact can be increased and maintained with rapport and the progression of discussion.

Additional support

- Nodding can convey encouragement and compassion, and conveys understanding.
 - Conveying confidence and understanding helps patients know that the topic of violence is not new or unusual for the listener.
- An unrushed, relaxed approach waits for the conversation to unfold and does not rush the speaker.