



# Active listening

**Have you ever had a conversation with somebody, but felt like they weren't really listening to you? Perhaps they appeared distracted, or their responses just seemed to 'miss the mark'? It's likely that they weren't engaging in 'active listening'.**

Active listening is especially important as part of safeguarding work. When we're working with adults experiencing abuse and neglect, we need to practice active listening to ensure that we are hearing and understanding what is being said, as well as what might not be being said.

This key skill can also support wider work with adults with care and support needs, as well as conversations we have with colleagues, family, or friends.

## **What do we mean by 'active listening'?**

When we practice active listening, we're doing more than 'just' listening. Rather, we are active participants in the interaction. We make it a priority to really understand what we are being told, and to make the other person feel heard and comfortable sharing their experience and perspective. This is never more important than when the adult is sharing difficult or sensitive information.

## **How do we engage in 'active listening'?**

There are a number of techniques that you can use to develop your active listening skills.

**Avoid distractions:** To engage in active listening you need to be fully present. Give the adult your full attention and, wherever possible, ensure that you won't be distracted by your phone or other people, and that you are physically comfortable. It's difficult to be fully present if you're thinking about when you'll next get a chance to visit the bathroom, or to grab a drink or snack, so ensure you're comfortable ahead of important interactions.

**Think about what's not being said:** We know that the majority of communication is non-verbal. Dial-in to the non-verbal cues the adult is giving. What are their body language and facial expressions telling you? Think about your own body language, and what messages you may be inadvertently giving. As long as it's comfortable, maintaining some eye contact can show that you are listening.

**Use open-ended questions:** One of the fastest ways to shut down a conversation is to ask a string of 'yes' or 'no' questions. It makes the conversation feel more like an interrogation and doesn't allow for any insight into how the adult really feels. Instead, asking open-ended questions shows that you are genuinely interested in the other person, and provides them with the space to share any feelings and rationale behind their answer. Something as simple as, "Can you tell me more about that?" shows that you are invested in their answer.

**Use reflection to show you understand:** It can be a useful strategy to repeat back what you've heard, to show that you've understood, and to allow the adult the opportunity to clarify and correct your understanding, if necessary. Try, "So what you're saying is..." or "I can hear that you're feeling..."

**Don't feel that you need to fill the silence or offer a solution:** To be a truly active listener it's important to become comfortable with silence. If you rush to fill every silence it can appear that, instead of actually listening to the adult, you've been planning your next contribution to the conversation. A slower paced conversation gives everybody the chance to hear, reflect, and respond, in a thoughtful way.

Similarly, don't feel that the only valuable contribution you can make is to offer a solution. Sometimes, just feeling heard and receiving empathy can make the world of difference to someone, as well as help them to come to their own decisions.

### Where can I find more information?

**When it comes to active listening, few are more skilled than the Samaritans, who offer listening and support to people struggling to cope.**

You can download their 'SHUSH listening tips' document below, as well as explore their corporate training courses, including their 'Listening skills' course:

- [Samaritans SHUSH Listening Tips \(PDF, 176KB\)](#)
- [Samaritans Course: Listening Skills](#)

You may also find it helpful to visit our 'language and terminology' and 'person-centred approaches' learning resources, which can be found on our website:

- [Learning and podcasts | West Sussex Safeguarding Adults Board](#)