



## Empathic Listening: 9 Strategies For Compassionate Communication

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One of the most valuable personal growth and relational skills you can learn is empathic listening (also called active listening).

It's a skill that serves not only others, but also one that stretches you to

become more loving, compassionate, and patient person.

It's an essential skill to master both for your personal and professional interactions.

Maybe you're a person others naturally seek out in order to share their problems or frustrations. Or maybe you'd like to help someone close to you who has a dilemma and doesn't know what to do. If you're married or in a love relationship, empathic listening skills can build a healthy, happy connection rather than one fraught with conflict and misunderstanding.

***How you listen to people can make all the difference to them and to you.***

### What is Empathic Listening?

You may believe empathic listening means feeling sorry for someone else. But it is so much more than that. Empathic listening affords tremendous therapeutic value for someone struggling with a problem, as it allows them to solve their difficulties in the company of a caring, [mindful listener](#).

As the speaker hears himself talk, he gains more clarity about his problem and becomes better equipped to find a resolution. When he or she feels heard, an emotional burden is lifted, and they feel less stressed and confused.

Why is empathic listening important? As an active listener, you empower the speaker to higher self-esteem and self-awareness simply through your willingness to hear them.

Empathic listening:

- Creates a safe space for conflict resolution and problem-solving.
- Builds respect, trust, and mutual understanding.
- Relieves tensions and discord.

- Encourages deeper sharing of feelings and information.

Empathic listening is not a natural skill to master, mainly because most of us would rather talk than listen. It's more complicated than [basic listening](#) because empathetic listening is often required when the speaker is in pain, angry, or upset. Says mediation expert and author, [Gregorio Billikopf](#), "Empathic listening requires that we accompany a person in her moment of sadness, anguish, self-discovery, challenge (or even great joy!)."

### How to Practice Empathic Listening

Active, empathic listening isn't part of a conversation in the traditional sense. There's no simple dialogue or competing to talk. With empathic listening, it's all about the other person and what they are trying to communicate — with their words, with the words left unspoken, and with their emotions. The main goal of empathic listening is to understand what the other person is saying and to give them the space to feel heard and validated.

As an empathic listener, you must be willing to do the following:

- Allow the other person to lead the conversation and determine the topic discussed.
- Remain utterly attentive to what the other person is saying.
- Avoid interrupting, even when you have something important to add.
- Ask [open-ended questions](#) that invite more from the speaker.
- Avoid coming to premature conclusions or offering solutions.
- Reflect to the speaker what you heard them say.

In addition to these actions, the most critical skill you can offer is [empathy](#). Empathy requires a willingness to put yourself in the shoes of the other person, so they feel heard in a [non-judgmental way](#). Empathy is the grace note of empathic listening, as it allows the speaker to feel safe, acknowledged, and valued. With empathy, you are telling the speaker, "I want to hear what you're saying. I understand your situation, and I want you to feel safe that I'm not judging you." As a personal coach, I was trained to use active listening with my clients. Even when I can see what I think is the best course of action for a client, my role is to facilitate *their* awareness and help them reach their own solutions. It is much harder than it might appear.

We often want to give people solutions and tell them what we think will make them happier, more successful, more confident.

This approach comes from a sincere desire to improve people's lives, but it can be a knee-jerk reaction because, as a culture, we are so solution-oriented. We grow impatient with too much discourse and too little resolution.

### Examples of Empathic Listening

Let's say your spouse comes to you and says, "I'm really upset at the way you teased me in front of our friends at dinner."

A natural first reaction is to feel defensive and maybe even irritated. You were being playful, and you feel your spouse is overreacting or being too sensitive. You could say these things to your spouse, but he or she will feel unheard and misunderstood. And you will miss an opportunity to relate to your spouse and empathize with his or her pain. A better way to respond would be to stop what you are doing, sit down with your spouse, and give him or her your full attention. Then engage in an empathic listening conversation like this:

**You:** *"I'm sorry sweetie. Tell me more about how my teasing made you feel."* **(You are inviting your spouse to continue talking and sharing.)**

**Your spouse:** *"It embarrasses me because it makes me look silly and insecure about something I value. And I just don't like you teasing me in front of other people."*

**You:** *"So when I tease you, especially in front of others, you don't feel confident and secure. And you'd prefer I don't tease you in front of others. Right?"* **(You are validating and reflecting your spouses' words to confirm them.)**

**Your spouse:** *"Yes, but it's more than that. It also feels like you don't respect me and that you're willing to be funny at my expense. And that hurts."*

**You:** *"Wow, I didn't think of it that way. I can see how my teasing might feel like a putdown or disrespect. I don't want to hurt you, and I'm sorry. Is there more you want to say?"* **(You are honoring the feelings your spouse has shared, showing empathy, and inviting more talk.)**

**Your spouse:** *"I'd prefer you just not to tease me at all, especially about things that are important to me."* **(Your spouse says the last part with strong body language.)**

**You:** *"I hear you, and I will stop teasing you because now I know how hurtful it is. I'm glad you shared this with me. What are the things that are most important to you?"* **(You have validated your partner and offered to change your behavior. And you have noticed body language and asked an open-ended question to invite more conversation.)**

Here are 9 strategies for practicing empathic listening:

### 1. Take the time.

Active, empathic listening requires time. The speaker needs to feel they have all the time in the world to release the flood of feelings and worries they have bottled up inside. Only when they release this backlog of emotion are they finally able to have clarity and the ability to reach conclusions.

It's easy to lose patience with a speaker who is processing his or her feelings and articulating them through the fog of emotion or confusion. You can't rush the speaker through this process or expect them to accept your quick solution. Patience is imperative if you truly want to help someone.

### 2. Offer empathy, not sympathy.

Sometimes we disguise empathic listening with words of sympathy. Perhaps we have experienced a similar situation, so we share it to let the speaker know we understand. To the speaker trying to process difficult emotions, it can feel like you're stealing their thunder or deflecting attention to yourself.

True empathetic listening requires you leave your stories and experiences at the door. You don't need to share them for the speaker to know you understand what she is saying. Empathy says, "I get you," rather than "I get you because I've had it even worse."

### 3. Pay attention to body language.

Your [entire body](#) needs to let the speaker know you are fully present. Turn off your phone so you aren't tempted to look at it. Try not to shift your eyes to pay attention to others around you. Keep an open, accepting posture with your arms and legs uncrossed.

Lean in as the other person is speaking and look them in the eye on occasion (but not constantly). Try not to fidget or shift around to show impatience or irritation.

Also pay attention to the speaker's body language. What is he or she communicating with facial expressions, position of arms and legs, or movements?

### 4. Refrain from solutions.

As much as you might want to jump in and save the day with the perfect solution, don't do it. Just listen, nod, make small comments that show you've heard what was said. But don't interrupt the process the speaker is going through as they make their way to a solution themselves. You will generally find that if you wait, the other person will come to the same conclusion. If they ask you for a solution directly, don't offer it right away. Ask the speaker what they would suggest to you if the roles were reversed. Always try to give the power back to the other person.

### 5. Use open-ended, empathic, or dangling questions.

Use thoughtful, open-ended questions (that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer) to invite more profound thought and consideration from the speaker. You might ask, "How did you feel about that?" Or "What do you think the best next step might be?"

You can also ask [empathic questions](#) that relate to the speaker's emotional state. You might ask, "What did you feel when that happened?" You might notice the speaker looks sad (or angry or fearful), and you can say, "Your expression looks sad. What's behind that?"

Try not to use leading questions with the intention of directing the speaker to your solution. Your goal is to help them gain more clarity and self-awareness.

One way to do this is with a dangling question. This kind of question is an incomplete question like, “And if you had to do it again, you might . . .” It leaves things hanging without an answer so that the speaker can determine the direction of the conversation.

#### 6. Ask for more.

Often a speaker will offer a crumb of information, and you can tell it’s just the tip of the iceberg. You know or suspect there’s more just below the surface, and all they need is a nudge to bring it forth. Even if you don’t suspect there’s more, there usually is, so it’s always worth asking.

A question as simple as, “Is there more?” can unleash more of the story or the emotions behind the story. You can ask this several times (maybe slightly rephrased) until it’s clear the speaker has nothing more to add on the topic.

#### 7. Repeat a phrase or word.

When the speaker is sharing powerful information, they may conclude with a sentence or statement that expresses their pain, worry, or frustration. For example, the speaker might tell a story about being betrayed by a friend and conclude with the statement, “I am so mad, I never want to speak to her again.” You can repeat, “You are so mad, you just don’t want to speak to her.” Or you can just say, “You’re really mad.”

This response lets the speaker know you are tracking with her and give her a cue to add more or clarify her statement. When you repeat the word or phrase, try to imitate the same tone of voice the speaker used. Don’t repeat it as a question or with any judgment.

#### 8. Allow for silences.

Long silences can be uncomfortable but resist the urge to fill the silence with your suggestions or remarks. Allow the speaker to use the silence to process his or her thoughts and then to break the silence when they are ready to speak. When you give them this space without interrupting them, you are letting them know you’re there for them and willing to allow them the time they need to gain clarity. When a speaker realizes you aren’t going to interrupt them, they are free to slow down and process more internally, which is necessary for analytical thinking.

You might find these silences and slower-paced talking difficult to handle. But it is truly a gift to just be present and allow the speaker the freedom to reflect and articulate at his or her own pace.

#### 9. Stay calm.

If the speaker is sharing intense, emotional, or upsetting information, it's hard not to express your own emotions or judgments. You may feel the need to react with shock, disagreement, or even defensiveness. If the person speaking is your spouse or romantic partner, and the topic of the conversation relates to you (as in the example above), it's even more difficult to restrain yourself from reacting.

But it's impossible to be an active listener when you're building your own case, deflecting blame, or getting angry. If you can't listen calmly and practice active listening skills, then delay the conversation until you can.

### Is there a time to offer challenges or suggestions?

When you have been the empathic listener and spent a good amount of time allowing the speaker to vent and process, the speaker will likely come to some conclusion or solution for themselves. Or maybe they will still be confused but feel greatly relieved and have more clarity than they did previously.

Once the emotion is drained and the words spoken and heard, then it may be appropriate for you to offer suggestions or challenge something you feel needs to be reconsidered.

Always ask the speaker if they want your input before you offer your words. At this point, they should have trust in you and recognize you aren't passing judgment on them.

### Now it's time to practice empathic listening activities.

The best way to become an empathic, active listener is through practice. Look for opportunities to listen to a friend going through a problem or a co-worker who is coping with a work challenge.

Make a point of being a better listener with your significant other — even during times of conflict or confrontation. Your empathic listening skills can de-escalate a fight and serve as a model for future communication as a couple.

Remember . . .

- Focus intently on the other person and what they are saying.

# 9 STRATEGIES FOR EMPATHIC LISTENING

**1** GIVE THEM YOUR TIME.

**2** OFFER EMPATHY, NOT SYMPATHY.

**3** PAY ATTENTION TO BODY LANGUAGE.

**4** REFRAIN FROM SOLUTIONS.

**5** USE OPEN-ENDED EMPATHIC QUESTIONS.

**6** ASK FOR MORE DETAILS.

**7** REPEAT A PHRASE OR WORD.

**8** DON'T FILL THE SILENCES.

**9** DON'T REACT, STAY CALM.

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- Use empathy rather than sympathy.
- Offer plenty of time and don't get distracted.
- Refrain from being judgmental or giving advice.
- Reflect what the speaker is saying.
- Ask open-ended questions.

<https://liveboldandbloom.com/06/self-improvement/empathic-listening>