

REDISCOVERING CONNECTION THROUGH LISTENING

In a world shaped by uncertainty and polarised opinions, **genuine listening has become a lost art form**. Misinformation spreads quickly. People feel unheard or misunderstood. Conversations often happen in echo chambers.

But truly listening is one of the most powerful ways we can begin to rebuild **trust, empathy, and connection**. When we listen with intention, we show others they matter. And that's the foundation of any **strong community**. This Mental Health Awareness Week, let's remember: community doesn't just happen; we create it, one conversation at a time.



DID YOU KNOW?

The average adult spends nearly 70% of their waking hours communicating, but we rarely pause to reflect on how we listen. Yet most of us never learn how to listen well, and that's where disconnection begins. Let's change that!

THE PYRAMID OF LISTENING

From Passive Hearing to Empathetic Connection

Not all listening is equal. This framework shows the wide range of listening levels, from being distracted or disengaged to listening with deep empathy and presence. By noticing how we show up, we can shift how we connect.

LISTENING LEVEL

WHAT IT IS

EXAMPLE

WHAT YOU CAN DO

IGNORING / PRETENDING

At this level, you're physically present, but mentally absent. Signs include distracted eyes (none or minimal eye contact), checking your device, and short replies.

Your colleague begins sharing a personal story in a team catch-up. You instinctively glance at your phone when it buzzes — and though you don't respond, they pause, sensing your attention slip.

- **Create a distraction-free zone:** Before the conversation begins, silence or switch off notifications, and physically move your phone out of reach — ideally out of sight.
- **Show up with your body:** How we sit and orient ourselves matters. Face the speaker with an open posture — no crossed arms or half-turned shoulders. These cues signal: "I'm present, and I care about what you're saying."
- **Use minimal encouragers:** Simple behaviours like nodding, smiling, or saying "I see," and "go on" help the speaker feel seen and safe to continue. These signals reinforce connection without interrupting their flow.

SELECTIVE LISTENING

You're listening — but only to what feels directly interesting to you. You may unintentionally "tune out" when the topic shifts. Common signs include interrupting, or suddenly "perking up" when you hear something about you.

A friend is telling you about a difficult family situation. You zone out during the backstory, only engaging when they mention something that reminds you of your family. Without meaning to, you jump in to share your own experience — and miss out on the whole context.

- **Tune in to your attention patterns:** Notice when your focus drifts. Ask yourself: "Am I really listening, or just waiting for my turn?" This small awareness helps you shift back into presence.
- **Mentally paraphrase as they speak:** Repeat key ideas in your mind as you listen. This keeps you engaged and helps prevent your brain from jumping ahead to your own stories.
- **Get curious beyond your comfort zone:** Even if the topic feels outside your usual interests, try asking: "What was that like for you?" or "How did that make you feel?" This invites deeper sharing and reminds the other person that their experience matters.



Practice tip

Notice your default listening level, and choose one small step to move up the pyramid today.

THE PYRAMID OF LISTENING

LISTENING LEVEL

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MINDFUL LISTENING

This level is all about being fully present. You're not distracted, not rehearsing your next point, and not rushing to respond. You notice when your mind wanders, and you return, without judgment.

You're catching up with a loved one. As they share a tricky work situation, your thoughts drift to tomorrow's to-do list. You take a slow breath, refocus on their face, and really listen to the rest of what they're saying.

- **Use your breath as an anchor:** Before responding, take one slow breath. It helps reset your attention and signals you're listening with intention.
- **Repeat a grounding phrase:** Quietly say to yourself: "Be here now" or "Listen to understand." It brings you back when your thoughts wander.
- **Let go of your inner monologue:** Instead of crafting your reply while they're still talking, pause. Give them space to finish. Then respond from what you've just heard, not what you planned to say earlier.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening means you're not just hearing the words — you're reflecting understanding, and inviting the other person to go deeper. It shows you're engaged, curious, and genuinely interested. You use prompts that help the speaker feel seen and understood.

A colleague is explaining why a project deadline felt unmanageable. Instead of nodding silently or offering a quick fix, you say: "So it felt like the expectations weren't clear from the start — is that right?" They pause, then open up more, realising you get it.

- **Paraphrase key points:** Summarise in your own words: "What I'm hearing is..." or "So you felt frustrated when..." This helps confirm you've understood them accurately.
- **Use open-ended follow-ups:** Prompt reflection with questions like: "What was that like for you?" or "What would have helped in that moment?" These show interest and help uncover more insight.
- **Avoid assumptions or conclusions:** Instead of finishing their sentence or jumping ahead, check in: "Did I get that right?" Let them guide the story, not your interpretation.

EMPATHETIC LISTENING

Empathetic listening is all about tuning into the speaker's emotions. You're not just there to respond or problem-solve — you're there to feel with them. You create space for their experience without rushing in to judge, fix, or compare.

A friend opens up about feeling overwhelmed. Instead of offering tips, you pause, let their words land, and say: "That sounds really heavy. What can I do to help ease it for you?"




- **Validate without fixing:** Instead of trying to solve the problem, offer reassurance: "That totally makes sense." or "Anyone in your shoes would feel that way."
- **Hold the silence:** Sometimes, the most powerful thing you can do is stay quiet and stay present. A soft look or gentle nod can say: "I'm with you."

LISTENING PRACTICE LOOP (20 MINUTES)

Build Real-World Listening Habits Through Experience

Listening is a skill we can talk about endlessly, but it only truly develops through **practice**. This structured 20-minute loop gives you the chance to slow down, try out new techniques, and notice your listening habits in real time. Whether in a team, group, or at home, this simple but powerful exercise builds trust, confidence, and connection.

Use the table to guide each role. The magic of this loop is in repetition, with every round, your awareness sharpens and your ability to hold space deepens.

 ROLE	 WHAT TO DO	 TIPS & PROMPTS
 TELLER	Share a real-life challenge from work or life (avoid topics that feel too raw or personal if you feel uncomfortable). The goal is to speak uninterrupted for 5 minutes while the listener fully focuses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “A time I didn’t feel heard...”• “A recent conversation that challenged my confidence”• “An unexpected reaction I received and how it made me feel” <p> Don’t worry about being polished. Just speak from experience.</p>
 LISTENER	Practise empathetic listening . Your job is not to fix, analyse, or give advice — but to stay present and make the speaker feel safe and understood.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be fully present without distractions• Paraphrase key points: “So you’re saying...”• Validate emotions: “That sounds really tough.” <p> Focus on emotional presence, not performance. Stay curious and open throughout.</p>
 OBSERVER	Watch and take notes. You’re not judging, you’re offering helpful feedback that builds awareness and skill. Focus on behaviours that reflect presence, curiosity, and empathy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Was the listener fully focused (body language, eye contact)?• Did they interrupt or stay silent?• Did they reflect what they heard or validate emotion? <p> Afterwards, share:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 things the listener did well• 1 gentle suggestion for growth

✅ Switch roles and repeat until each person has experienced each role. You’ll be pleasantly surprised at how this exercise builds your listening muscles!

SMALL STEPS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE IN BUILDING DEEPER CONNECTIONS

Every time we pause to truly listen, we help rebuild a sense of connection. Whether it’s with a colleague, a friend, or even a stranger, keeping an open ear goes a long way in fostering a stronger community.

