



AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION

Listening & Communication Skills for Mentors - TIP SHEET

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Introduction: Active listening is different from regular conversation in that the focus is on the person with whom you are speaking, not on yourself. People seldom engage in active listening, because the most common human response to hearing another person's thoughts or expression of emotion is to apply the subject matter to one's own life, then reply with the goal of sharing our own perspective. By being mindful of these very real human tendencies, and making a serious effort to pay total attention to what another person is saying, we can more easily understand and process that person's perspective. Then and only then can we begin to embrace the true meaning behind their words and feelings.

The following tips may help those who are in a mentoring position to connect with youth:

- Focus on what your mentee is saying; don't worry about what to say next. That will come naturally as you follow along. Trust your abilities to engage on this level and control any anxiety you may feel with slow, steady breathing.
- Avoid being judgmental. You may not agree with what your mentee is saying, but do not give her advice. It's typically a conversation ender, especially for adolescents.
- Work hard to build trust. If you want a mentee to open up and talk to you, he must feel that he can trust you. Confidentiality is critical in the mentor/mentee relationship. Only if a mentee is threatening to hurt himself or others—or if he provides information about someone else being hurt—should you break confidentiality.
- Look at your mentee when she is speaking. She may not want to look at you, but you should make every effort to establish eye contact with her. Be aware of how you are sitting. Try to position yourself so that you are facing your mentee, as opposed to sitting side by side. Maintain good posture and lean slightly toward her if appropriate. Consider sitting in an open stance—do not cross your arms across your chest. It is okay to use your hands to talk if that's what you normally do.
- Be mindful of your tone of voice. Moderate your speech so that you are talking at a normal volume and speed. We tend to talk fast and at a higher pitch when we are anxious. Remember to take slow deep breaths when possible to control this tendency.
- Ask plenty of open-ended questions to help understand what your mentee is saying. Open-ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," but require a thoughtful response. Such questions often start with these words: what, how, and could. "What else did she say to you?" "Could you have done something else?" or "How did that help you?"
- Only ask one question at a time. If you ask multiple questions and do not give your mentee a chance to answer, he may become defensive or may only process the last question you asked. Adolescents in particular may need a little more time than you consider "normal" to think about an answer before they reply.

- If your mentee makes a habit of saying “I don’t know” or shrugging during conversation, you can try a couple of different techniques. Silence can be very effective, so don’t say anything for 30 seconds or so, and see if she offers an answer. You can also gently probe by saying, “Well, if you did know, what would you say?” Or “Can you guess?”
- If you are having a very hard time following what your mentee is saying, stop him and tell him so in a respectful, non-judgmental manner. Ask him for clarification or ask him to repeat the information. For example: “I’m a little lost; please tell me again...” or “I’m confused... would you mind repeating that?”
- Summarize frequently to make sure you understand what you are being told. Start with: “Let me make sure I understand what you’ve told me.” If you get the information wrong, your mentee will more than likely just correct you and keep talking.
- Consider using closed questions (yes or no questions) when you are checking to make sure you understand what is being said. For example: “So you didn’t get any help with your homework. Is that what you meant?”
- You can reflect what your mentee is saying or how she looks to help her manage her emotions. Try to identify the key emotion being expressed. Examples: “You look really angry. What’s up?” or “Sounds like you are really upset about what happened.”
- It is appropriate to acknowledge a discrepancy between things your mentee says, or what he says and how he looks. Examples: “You’re telling me you’re not angry about what happened, but you’re tense and look angry.” Or “You said that you didn’t care what your friend did, but now you’re telling me how hurt you are.”
- If your mentee is trying to solve a problem of some kind, try to help her identify what the problem really is, then vocalize possible solutions or alternatives. Encourage her to choose one solution or alternative and put forth a serious effort to try to achieve it. Remember: it’s important not to tell her what to do, but instead help her to think through her own possible solutions or alternatives—as well as any consequences—before choosing one.
- If your mentee chooses a possible solution or alternative that will likely result in a negative consequence, help him to process why it might not be a good choice using several open-ended questions. For example: instead of saying, “If you do that, you’ll get in trouble,” try “If you do that, what do you think might happen? How will that help you get what you want?”

In summary, please remember that the relationships you are building are far more important than the exact words you use to communicate with your mentee. First and foremost, if she knows you care and you are trying to help her, she will likely always be open to talking with you. Nurture and protect that relationship to your best ability to ensure clear communication channels in the future.