

The Speaker-Listener Technique

Why use the Speaker-Listener technique?

Learning how to handle conflict well is critical to the success of your marriage. Communicating well is the best way to handle most conflicts. The Speaker-Listener technique is one of the most effective ways of communicating during conflict.

What are the advantages of the Speaker-Listener technique?

This technique helps you talk in a way that is both *clear* (so you truly understand what your partner is saying) and *safe* (no one fears the argument will get out of hand). Talking in this positive way helps prevent destructive ways of communicating: negative escalation of the argument, invalidating your partner, one person forcing the conversation while the other backs off, and negative interpretations of what your partner is thinking.

When should we use the Speaker-Listener technique?

This technique can be used whenever the conversation becomes too heated or the subject is very sensitive. Either partner can ask to use the Speaker-Listener technique at any time. Remember: it makes conversations *clear* and *safe*.

How do we use the Speaker-Listener technique?

Each person takes turns speaking while his or her partner listens and paraphrases what the speaker said. The following rules will make things clearer:

General Rules:

1. *The speaker has the floor.* If you're the listener, follow the rules below for the listener and wait for your turn to be the speaker. Use an object, such as a pen, to show who the speaker is.
2. *Share the floor.* Take turns letting each person be the speaker.
3. *Don't problem-solve.* Focus on having a good discussion, not finding a solution.

Rules for the Speaker:

1. *Speak for yourself.* Don't read your partner's mind. Express your feelings and thoughts, using "I" statements to express your point of view.
2. *Be brief.* Don't go on and on each time. You will have plenty of time to talk about everything that is on your mind as you both take turns.
3. *Stop and let the listener paraphrase.* After you've spoken for a short while, let your partner paraphrase what you just said. Help him or her understand your point of view. If the paraphrase is not quite accurate, politely restate what you meant.

Rules for the Listener:

1. *Paraphrase what you heard.* Repeat back what you heard in your own words to let your partner know you understand what they are saying. Wait till your turn as speaker to ask more questions.
2. *Focus on the speaker's message. Don't rebut.* Remember: your job is to listen and understand what your partner is saying. Wait till you are speaker to offer your own opinion.

Example of the Speaker-Listener Technique:

Tracey: Honey, I hate it when you forget to put your clothes in the dirty clothes hamper. You're always forgetting little things I want you to do. You must not care about me at all.

Peter: Geez, don't you ever stop? You're always on me about doing this, picking up that. I do what needs to be done. You're the one who is so disorganized.

Tracey: Wait a minute. We're getting out of hand here. Why don't we use that Speaker-Listener technique for a few minutes?

Peter: OK. You go first.

Tracey: (holding a pen to show she has the floor) I get frustrated when you don't put your clothes in the right place. When I have to go look for them all it makes me angry and gives me a headache.

Peter: So it really frustrates you when I forget to put my dirty clothes away. It even makes you get a headache sometimes.

Tracey: That's right. We're going through such a tough time financially now I get worried about every little thing. I know you care but sometimes when I feel insecure I get afraid that you won't help out and that I'll have to handle all of the pressure alone.

Peter: What I hear you saying is that you're really worried about our money situation. That makes you worry about a lot of things. When I don't help out around the house it makes you feel that you'll have to handle all these problems on your own.

Tracey: Exactly. Thanks for listening. Why don't you take the floor now (hands the pen over to Peter).

Peter: I'm worried about our finances, too. Sometimes I like to relax and not think and watch TV so I can forget about it for a while.

Tracey: So you worry about the money, too. Watching TV is one way you relax.

Peter: Yes. I want to talk about it, too. I feel bad that I don't make more money to provide for the family.

Tracey: Oh, honey. So it makes you feel bad that you don't bring in more money for me and the kids. But you want to talk about it.

Peter: That's right. Would you like the floor? (hands her the pen).

Tracey: Sweetheart, I appreciate all you do to provide for us. I think you're doing a great job. Thanks for talking about this.
(conversation continues)

Helpful ways to paraphrase:

"What I hear you saying is . . ."

"Sounds like . . ."

"If I understand you right, . . ."