



Effective Communication: Sharpen Your Listening Skills

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After reading the newsletter, the health unit coordinator should be able to:

1. Differentiate between hearing and listening.
2. Identify factors that impede effective listening.
3. Discuss techniques to promote effective listening.

As Nancy arrived for her shift at the evening HUC, her colleague on days, who was just leaving, said "Watch it—here comes Mr. Fleming, the husband of the patient in 214. I've had a terrible time with him today—just can't seem to satisfy him." Mr. Fleming seemed frustrated as he explained his needs. Nancy listened carefully, asked questions, and clarified what she thought he said. She was then able to take care of the issues that were concerning Mr. Fleming. He said, "Thank you—finally, someone has heard me."

Effective listening is a valuable and essential skill, particularly for people in the business of communicating, such as HUCs. This newsletter will discuss how to sharpen your listening skills, to enhance your job performance and provide better customer service. Actions that will improve listening skills, as well as listening pitfalls to avoid, will be covered.

Why Is Listening Important?

Effective communication occurs when the speaker sends a message and the listener understands it. Listening is, therefore, critical to the process of verbal communication. In becoming an effective listener, it's very important to realize that there is a big difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is a passive, physical act, the ability of the ears to perceive sound. Listening is the ability to attach meaning to that sound, and is an active process.



Listening serves many important functions in the workplace, the home, and the community. It is a way to obtain needed information, build relationships, serve customers, learn more about others, and assist in problem-solving.

Building Effective Listening Skills

As children, we spend years being taught how to speak, read, and write properly. But we typically receive very little, if any, education in how to listen effectively, even though most of us spend more time listening than reading, writing, or speaking. As a result, many of us need to consciously brush up on our listening skills and eliminate bad listening habits developed over the years.



The normal rate of speech for most people is about 125 words per minute, while the rate of listening is about 500 words per minute. Humans can, therefore, listen about four times faster than they are able to speak. This means that, while someone is speaking, there is a lot of extra time for the brain to work while processing what the person is saying. If not properly controlled, this extra time can lead to the mind doing other things besides listening, such as wandering to unrelated issues, focusing on the speaker's appearance or mannerisms, or thinking about what to say next. To prevent this, learn to notice where your mind is focused during communication. Keep tabs on that focus, and if it starts to

shift to something other than the speaker, consciously re-focus on what the speaker is saying. This is a skill that improves greatly with regular practice.

The first key in listening effectively is to give your full attention to the person speaking. Signs that you are paying attention include making eye contact, leaning forward slightly, and stopping other activities. While it is tempting for busy HUCs to continue doing other work while communicating, current studies suggest that multi-tasking is not beneficial. In most cases, instead of accomplishing two tasks, neither task is done completely or well. As you're paying attention, also notice the speaker's body language and tone of voice, in addition to what he or she says. This can provide valuable clues to the message and how the speaker is feeling. Then, let the speaker know you are paying attention. Nodding periodically or saying, "I see" lets the person know you are tuned in. Finally, ask questions or make statements in an attempt to clarify what the person has said, to make sure you understand. For example, saying "It sounds like you're really frustrated by this" or "You're trying to get the referral approved by your insurance company, is that right?" lets you and the speaker know if you understand the communication.



Guidelines for Effective Listening

To maximize your listening skills, take note of these common issues in listening:

Don't focus on the speaker's mannerisms or physical characteristics: Have you ever been so focused on someone's long fingernails or odd facial expressions that you weren't really listening to what they were saying? Avoid this by realizing when it is happening, and re-focusing your attention on their message.

Stop talking: You can't talk and listen at the same time. Don't interrupt the speaker. Allow him or her to finish, then ask questions or clarify.

Pay attention and avoid multi-tasking: Have you ever tried to talk with a person who remains focused on their work or other activity, and either doesn't acknowledge you or just grunts? How did it make you feel? You might have wondered if they heard you, were ignoring you, or if they even cared what you were saying! Not only is this rude, but valuable information can be missed. And, studies show that doing two things at once usually takes longer than doing the tasks separately, so you're not even saving time. Also, avoid distractions, such as looking at your watch, shuffling papers, or yawning. These give the speaker the impression that you are bored or don't have time to listen.

Don't assume or guess what the person is going to say: "Knowing" what the person is going to say next commonly leads to misunderstanding. Sometimes, people hear what they think they're going to hear,

instead of the intended message, thus leading to errors. Clear your mind and listen to the message completely before determining what the speaker's intent is.

Keep an open mind: Allow the person to finish speaking before you respond or make a mental judgment. Thinking, "I can't believe she's asking me to do this!" in the middle of the person's talk will only prevent hearing the whole message, and a misunderstanding may occur.

Avoid formulating your own response while the other person is talking: This is a very common problem that interferes with effective listening. The next time you are listening to someone, try to notice if this is one of your habits. If so, consciously keep your mind clear, and realize you'll have plenty of time to formulate a response when the person is finished speaking. In fact, pausing to think once the person is finished speaking lets the speaker know that you have been listening carefully.

Don't always try to fix things: Listen carefully first, then respond with clarification or questions. Don't jump right into a solution except for simple issues, such as "Where are the toner cartridges for the printer?" If a colleague comes to you complaining about a co-worker, for example, your immediate response may be to tell her how to handle the co-worker. Instead, focus on the feelings, "It sounds like you were really hurt by that remark."

Tune into your own reactions: Know yourself well enough to pick up on the situations that "push your buttons" and may cause you to either not listen or to interrupt and overreact. For example, Sarah used to let people "walk all over her" in the workplace. Sarah has overcome that by becoming more assertive. However, when someone now asks her to do something for them, Sarah realizes that she must listen carefully and be aware of her past experiences in order to respond appropriately and avoid overreacting.

Recognize and acknowledge when you can't listen effectively: If someone is trying to talk to you when it is impossible to listen effectively, apologize, then let them know that you'll get back to them just as soon as possible. For example, if a family member comes to the desk for a routine matter, but you are urgently trying to let the nurse know of a panic lab value, the lab value must take priority. Saying something like, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Carr, I need to take care of this and then I'll be right with you." lets them know that you will listen to their needs.

As a HUC, you serve as the "communications center" for staff, visitors, and patients. By using effective listening skills, you can help to promote efficiency, safety, and good patient care on your unit.





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Learning Objectives:

After reading the newsletter, the health unit coordinator should be able to:

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Suggested Adjunct Activities:

1. Have the HUCs discuss their experiences in which listening skills either helped or hindered a particular situation. Ask them to identify the techniques that helped with listening, or the factors that caused it to be ineffective.

Competency Assessment Tool Answer Key:

1. C. Carol understands what her friend Kim is saying about her job.
2. A. True
3. C. listening is the ability to attach meaning to sound
4. A. True
5. B. False
6. C. making eye contact
7. B. "You're worried about giving your presentation?"
8. B. False
9. B. clear his mind and focus on what Jerry is saying
10. D. "It must hurt to feel that way, after you studied so much."



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- ____ 1. Which of the following best describes effective communication?
- A. Mary tells Judy about the new dress she bought.
 - B. Tim listens as his co-worker Jason complains about his landlord.
 - C. Carol understands what her friend Kim is saying about her job.
 - D. Barbara explains to her boss why she needs a raise in salary.
- ____ 2. Listening is an essential part of effective verbal communication.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 3. Which of the following is true regarding hearing and listening?
- A. hearing is an active process, while listening is passive
 - B. listening is the perception of sound
 - C. listening is the ability to attach meaning to sound
 - D. hearing and listening are essentially the same
- ____ 4. Generally, much more emphasis is placed on teaching people to speak, read and write than to listen.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 5. Most people can speak faster than they can listen.
- A. True
 - B. False

- ____ 6. Which of the following listening behaviors most clearly demonstrates that the listener is paying attention to the speaker?
- A. leaning back in the chair
 - B. smiling
 - C. making eye contact
 - D. looking at a watch
- ____ 7. Becky, a HUC, says to her colleague, Gloria, “I dread making that presentation at the staff meeting this afternoon.” Gloria appropriately clarifies what she thought she heard by saying:
- A. “I see.”
 - B. “You’re worried about giving your presentation?”
 - C. “Don’t worry—there won’t be many people there.”
 - D. “I know how you feel.”
- ____ 8. Continuing your work while someone is talking to you is an effective way to get two things done at once.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 9. Jerry approaches his neighbor, Dan, and says, “I’ve been meaning to ask...” Dan immediately thinks, “I knew it—he’s going to ask to borrow my new lawn mower.” Dan should:
- A. tell Jerry right away that he can’t use the lawn mower
 - B. clear his mind and focus on what Jerry is saying
 - C. think about his response while Jerry is speaking
 - D. change the subject quickly so that Jerry won’t ask
- ____ 10. After taking a certification exam, Carol says to Darla, “I know I blew it—it was awful!” Darla’s best response is:
- A. “You did not blow it—I’ll bet you did great!”
 - B. “Just study harder next time, and you’ll do fine.”
 - C. “Did you study 2 hours a day, like I told you?”
 - D. “It must hurt to feel that way, after you studied so much.”