



Effective Communication: Barriers to Effective Listening

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1. Discuss the benefits of using effective listening skills.
2. List four barriers to effective listening and examples of each.
3. Identify ways to avoid selected barriers to effective listening.

Listening is, perhaps, one of the most important of the communication skills. Without listening, we cannot accurately understand what someone else is telling us, determine whether they understand our directions, or determine what their needs are. Effective 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.



As an HUC, you are in the business of communication. You are an integral part of the communication process involving staff members, patients, visitors, physicians, and other departments. Because of this, the listening skills you use every day are critical to your job performance. This newsletter will discuss common barriers to effective listening and how to avoid them.

How Does Communication Occur?

Communication is the process by which information is sent and received between individuals, through verbal or nonverbal means. Verbal communication involves the use of words, while nonverbal communication involves behavior, such as body language or use of gestures.

The communication process involves a sender (the "talker") and a receiver (the "listener"). In order for effective communication to occur, the sender must clearly send the message he/she intends to send, and the receiver must accurately interpret that message. Both the "talker" and the "listener" share responsibility for communicating effectively.

While learning how to speak effectively is a skill often taught in schools and universities, less emphasis is commonly placed on teaching the specifics of effective listening skills. Like many skills in life, effective listening requires the active management of thoughts and impulses, such as keeping a clear, bias-free mind and resisting the urge to interrupt. Listening is a skill that can be practiced and improved over a lifetime—the more it is effectively practiced, the better it gets.

What are Barriers to Listening?

A barrier to listening is any factor that hinders or prevents one person from effectively listening to another. Because listening is such a vital part of the communication process, barriers that prevent effective listening can cause a breakdown in communication. This often results in negative or unwanted outcomes.



It is important to distinguish between hearing and listening, since these are not the same processes.



Hearing is the physical act of perceiving sound, when sound waves are picked up by the ear and transported through the ear structures. Hearing is a passive process, and with normal hearing function, occurs whether we want it to or not. Listening involves not only hearing the sound, but processing the information, interpreting it, and assigning meaning to it. Listening is an active process that requires attention and concentration.

Common Barriers to Listening

There are a number of factors that can prevent or decrease effective listening. In many cases, these are bad listening habits that have developed over a long period of time, and the person using them may not even be aware that they are occurring. Some of these include:

Interrupting: If you begin to speak while the other person is still talking, this interruption cuts off the person's intended communication. And, because you thought of something to say while the other person was speaking, then part of the person's spoken message was also missed. When listening, do not talk, except to obtain brief clarification, if needed.

Not paying attention: With so many things competing for our attention these days, it can be difficult to focus exclusively on active listening when communication occurs. With practice, however, focus and attention span can improve.

Defensiveness: Feeling attacked or disrespected by the person speaking can instantly turn off effective listening skills. A common reaction for the listener is to go into defense mode, and immediately begin thinking of all the reasons the speaker is wrong. This defensiveness prevents the listener from fully receiving and understanding the speaker's message. HUCs are often on the receiving end of communications from upset patients, visitors, staff members and physicians. It is very important to listen carefully to these concerns without taking them personally. If you feel yourself becoming defensive, recognize this, take a breath, and re-focus attention on the speaker and issue at hand. You do not have to be subjected to abuse, however. If the speaker's behavior is inappropriate, such as use of profanity or verbal or physical assault, the conversation should be ended and assistance obtained, if necessary.

Judging or moralizing: Make sure that you are in a good mental position to truly listen to the person, not to pass judgment on them. When you are listening to a person and having thoughts like, "I'd never do that" or "She's going to regret that", you are not listening to all that the person is saying with an open mind, and can miss important pieces of the message.



Needing to be right: Some people have a difficult time listening effectively because they have strong need to be right. They may feel that allowing the person to speak shows that they agree with what is being said. It's important to realize that listening attentively does *not* imply agreement with the speaker.

Labeling: When the listener has a preconceived negative opinion of the speaker, effective listening may not occur. For example, if a family member who has already been labeled a "complainer" comes to the desk, the staff is likely to have less regard and interest for, and may be less likely to listen fully to, what the family member has to say.

Rehearsing the response: A common listening problem occurs when the listener mentally prepares his/her response while the other person is still speaking. This reduces effective communication, because the response is being formulated based only on part of the speaker's information, and because full attention is not being paid to what is being said. A more effective approach is to listen fully to the speaker's message, then formulate a response.

Being preoccupied with other thoughts or activities: Listening is an active process that requires your full participation. If your mind is working on other issues or problems, or you are continuing to perform other tasks while "listening", the quality of the listening will suffer. Turn your full attention to the speaker and tune into what he/she is saying, for maximum effectiveness.

Not being an engaged listener: Have you ever talked to someone who gave you no signs at all that you were being listened to? You may have wondered if the person heard anything you said, with no facial expressions, verbal sounds, or other evidence that you were being listened to. Some people have become very practiced at "pretending" to listen to others— they may face the speaker, and even make eye contact, although it's often evident that their eyes seem "glazed over." Behind this mask, nothing is connecting, and communication is not occurring. Effective listening requires engagement with the speaker. The engaged listener makes eye contact and shows that the message is being received through appropriate facial expressions, nodding the head, and verbal cues such as "mm-hmm" or "I see."



Listening is a critically important part of the communication process. By focusing on and improving your listening skills, you can help to promote efficiency, safety, quality care, and excellent customer service on your unit.



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Learning Objectives:

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

1. Discuss the benefits of using effective listening skills.
2. List four barriers to effective listening and examples of each.
3. Identify ways to avoid selected barriers to effective listening.

Suggested Adjunct Activities:

1. Have the HUCs discuss barriers to listening that they have experienced in the past, and how these have affected their interactions.
2. Present scenarios depicting various listening barriers and have the HUCs identify how these can be avoided.

Competency Assessment Tool Answer Key:

1. D. all of the above
2. D. saying, "No thanks"
3. C. both the listener and the speaker
4. A. True
5. D. Tom understands what Dan is saying about the meeting today
6. B. False
7. C. take a breath and focus on what the nurse is saying
8. C. judging
9. B. False
10. B. False



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

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

- ____ 1. Listening is a way to:
- A. learn more about others
 - B. obtain needed information
 - C. provide better customer service
 - D. all of the above
- ____ 2. Which of the following is an example of verbal communication?
- A. raising an eyebrow
 - B. waving to say goodbye
 - C. shrugging the shoulders
 - D. saying, "No thanks"
- ____ 3. The responsibility for effective communication rests with:
- A. the listener
 - B. the speaker
 - C. both the listener and the speaker
 - D. neither the listener nor the speaker
- ____ 4. Hearing is the physical act of perceiving sound.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 5. Which of the following best describes effective listening?
- A. Sarah explains to her supervisor why she deserves a raise
 - B. Paula tells Diane about her new puppy
 - C. Randall hears his co-worker talking at the nurse's station
 - D. Tom understands what Dan is saying about the meeting today

- ___6. Listening is a passive process that occurs whether we want it to or not.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ___7. A nurse approaches Wendy, the HUC, and says, “The lab says you didn’t send this order down for stat lab work, and...” As Wendy hears this, she immediately feels attacked. Wendy should:
- A. interrupt the nurse immediately to deny the accusation
 - B. be thinking about what happened to the order
 - C. take a breath and focus on what the nurse is saying
 - D. leave the desk area so she does not have to hear more
- ___8. Jenna’s co-worker, Ann, is describing how she behaved during a meeting with the supervisor. Jenna is thinking, “That’s not good—I can’t believe she did that.” What type of listening barrier is this?
- A. labeling
 - B. interrupting
 - C. judging
 - D. defensiveness
- ___9. Listening attentively and without interruption indicates agreement with what is being said.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ___10. If someone is facing the speaker and making eye contact, this assures that effective listening is occurring.
- A. True
 - B. False