

Signs of Active Listening

Non-Verbal Signs of Attentive or Active Listening

This is a generic list of non-verbal signs of listening, in other words people who are listening are more likely to display at least some of these signs. However these signs may not be appropriate in all situations and across all cultures.

Smile

Small smiles can be used to show that the listener is paying attention to what is being said or as a sign of agreeing or being happy about the messages being received. Combined with nods of the head, smiles can be powerful in affirming that messages are being listened to and understood.

Eye Contact

It is normal and usually encouraging for the listener to look at the speaker. Eye contact can however be intimidating, especially for more shy speakers – gauge how much eye contact is appropriate for any given situation. Combine eye contact with smiles and other non-verbal messages to encourage the speaker.

Posture

Posture can tell a lot about the sender and receiver in interpersonal interactions. The attentive listener tends to lean slightly forward or sideways whilst sitting. Other signs of active listening may include a slight slant of the head or resting the head on one hand.

Mirroring

Automatic reflection/mirroring of any facial expressions used by the speaker can be a sign of attentive listening. These reflective expressions can help to show sympathy and empathy in more emotional situations. Attempting to consciously mimic facial expressions (i.e. not automatic reflection of expressions) can be a sign of inattention.

Distraction

The active listener will not be distracted and therefore will refrain from fidgeting, looking at a clock watch, doodling, playing with their hair or picking their fingernails.

HURIER Model of Listening

The acronym HURIER is sometimes used in academic texts to summarise a model of effective listening skills. This model was developed by Judi Brownell of Cornell University.

H - Hearing

'Hearing' is used here in a very broad sense. Not only does it refer to the physical act of hearing, but also to picking up on non-verbal and other signals; tone of voice, body language and facial expressions for example.

U - Understanding

Once the message has been 'heard', the next step is to understand. This means tying together all the elements of 'hearing' to create a coherent understanding of what was communicated. Factors like language and accent may affect your understanding.

R - Remembering

Remembering requires focus. An effective listener needs to be able to remember the message they are receiving in its entirety.

I - Interpreting

Interpretation of the message builds on, and enhances, understanding. Interpretation means considering factors such as the context in which the message was sent. Importantly, here the listener also needs to be aware of, and avoid, any preconceptions or biases that they may hold that may affect how the message is interpreted.

E - Evaluating

Evaluating requires that the listener keeps an open mind on the messages they are receiving and does not jump to conclusions about what is being said. Evaluate all the information and only then start to formulate a response.

R - Responding

Finally, your response should be well-measured and demonstrate that you have understood what was communicated. It may be necessary to use techniques such as **clarification** and **reflection** as part of the response.