

Section Two

Communication: The Key to Relationships

LOOKING AHEAD

After completing this section, you will be able to

- Define communication and describe its process.
- Discuss the importance of communication.
- Explain how and where people learn to communicate.
- List ways in which family communication could be improved.
- Give reasons for formal training in interpersonal communication.
- Describe characteristics helpful in being a positive communicator.

I see communication as a huge umbrella that covers and affects all that goes on between human beings—the largest single factor determining kinds of relationships and individual happenings in the world.

—Virginia Satir

When asked in an informal survey to list the three most important factors necessary for a good marriage, 81 percent of respondents named communication and placed it ahead of love and friendship. Couples who desire satisfying long-term relationships need to invest time and energy into improving their communication skill. “We do not communicate,” was the couple’s agreed-upon answer when asked why they wanted a divorce. “Oh, but you do,” came the surprising reply from the counselor. The couple did not realize that whenever two people occupy the same environment, communication is taking place. Although people can stop talking, they continue to communicate with body language. An accurate reason for wanting to end a relationship is “We do not communicate well” or “The way we communicate has caused problems and damage to our relationship.”

Whether intentional or not, communication influences all relationships. Without communication, interaction would not occur. **Interpersonal communication** is a complex process of mutually exchanging messages between two or more individuals. Models of communication are not simple diagrams. When verbal exchange is taking place, what exactly is happening? Speaking and listening are two necessary parts of the process. Nonverbal behaviors accompany both. A communication interaction is an encompassing process in which:

- A message is sent verbally and nonverbally.
- The message is received and interpreted.
- Verbal and nonverbal feedback is usually given.
- Feedback is offered by the sender.

As you can see, the individuals in the exchange are simultaneously sending and receiving messages.

A major purpose of interpersonal communication is to share a common meaning. Both the sender and receiver are responsible for clarity. When different meanings come from messages, the outcome can be negative. “But that’s not what I meant” is far too common. What is worse is not being aware that you have been misunderstood. What was true years ago is probably still accurate today: As much as 70 percent of our communication efforts are probably misinterpreted, misunderstood, rejected, disliked, or distorted (Donaldson and Scannell, 1986).

Communication is the foundation for all relationships and the primary cause of their success or failure. Ineffective or faulty communication is at the root of most interpersonal difficulties. Effective communication is necessary to develop and maintain any positive interpersonal relationship.

Human communication is the most awesome force in the world. It can be directly responsible for peace or war, love or hate. Communication is unavoidable, and our communication skills are directly related to the quality of life we experience.

—Jacquelyn Carr

Most of the research on communication has focused on couples. Leo Buscaglia (1984) conducted a study in which he asked couples about problems and strengthening factors in their relationships. The same factor was identified as being both the most problematic and the most strengthening. Not surprisingly, it was communication. More than 85 percent of the hundreds of respondents said that the most essential quality for a lasting relationship was the ability to communicate (Buscaglia, 1992).

Studies have indicated that positive communication contributed to the strength of the stepfamily (Hanna and Knaub, 1981; Knaub, Hanna, and Stinnett, 1984). When stepchildren were asked to identify areas of concern, communication was frequently mentioned (Knaub and Hanna, 1984). One girl offered this response: “The worst thing about my stepfamily is that my stepfather thinks he is always right and we are always wrong; what he says goes” (p. 87). She suggested that he should listen and show a willingness to compromise, two important ingredients in positive communication.

Being able to communicate effectively benefits you in everyday situations, in a job search, in the advancement of your career, and in all types of relationships. When you think about your friendships, is communication an essential component? It is highly unlikely that you will remain friends with someone with whom you have difficulty communicating. Between patient and physician, full communication is indispensable because communication can be as important to healing as medicine (Cousins, 1989). Strong communication skills were listed as one of the top three aptitudes that employers want (Fisher, 2001). How well we communicate affects how others perceive us and all aspects of interpersonal relationships.

All communication is learned. Every baby who comes into this world comes only with raw materials—no self-concept, no experience of interacting with others, and no



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experience in dealing with the world. Babies learn all these things through communication with the people who are in charge of them from birth on. (Satir, 1988, p. 52)

Realizing how important communication skills are, one could assume that they would be taught as systematically as other valuable behaviors. How did you learn to communicate? Were you taught by trained professionals? Almost everyone learned by observation, modeling, and feedback; teaching came from untrained individuals. Communication is part of the socialization process. Most high schools have some type of communication classes to offer students. They can and should be taught right along with the three R's (McKay, Davis, and Fanning, 1983, p. 8).

A survey of psychology students at Southeast Community College assessed family communication on a 5-point scale ranging from excellent to poor, first within the family as a whole and then separately with their fathers and mothers. The results were interesting (Fig. II-1).

- Almost 50 percent rated overall family communication as good or excellent. About 20 percent placed it below satisfactory, and 30 percent rated it as satisfactory.
- A definite difference between fathers and mothers was noted. Thirty-five percent said their fathers needed improvement compared with 14 percent for mothers. Excellent were 28 percent of the mothers and only 8 percent of the fathers. If males are not raised to be communicative, they will be less capable as parents, another unfortunate outcome of gender-role stereotypic training.

Several suggestions for improvement were offered.

- Set aside time to talk and listen. Be sure that communication takes place daily. Statistics revealed that mothers on a typical workday spent only 11 minutes in focused conversation with their children, and fathers spent just 8 minutes (Cutler, 1989).
- Talk about everything, not just gripes and problems. Include as many or more positive subjects than negative ones.

- Allow and encourage everyone to talk. Consider all points of view and do not judge.
- Be sincerely interested and show this by actively listening.
- Ask questions, especially those that require more than a one-word answer: not, “How was school today?” but, “What class did you like (or not like) today and for what reason?”
- Be open, honest, and flexible when you communicate. Open communication is covered in Chapter 7.

Do you see how much is involved in communication? If you have followed the suggestions offered in this book, you have a head start in becoming an excellent communicator. Several attitudes and behaviors are important in the communication process.

- A life position of I’m OK, you’re OK is at the heart of positive communication. Participants have high self-esteem, and they treat each other with respect.
- Honesty in communication means authenticity. Communicators do not play games, mislead, and try to manipulate each other. Knowing that another person will be up-front with you creates a positive atmosphere.
- Openness is a necessity. A closed person who is not interested in learning and growing is a poor interpersonal communication candidate. You are likely to be enjoyed as a conversationalist if you are open.
- Willingness to share means that you are able and willing to disclose about yourself and to express your ideas. Listening is a valuable skill; however, if you only listen, you are not completely participating in an exchange.
- Expressiveness has been praised in terms of health and well-being. Willingness and ability to show your feelings also help you to be a better communicator.
- Appropriateness relates to the content of a message. An effective speaker knows what is suitable to say and what is not.
- Flexibility is needed in positive communication. Being closed-minded is detrimental to a give-and-take communication process.
- A sense of humor, although not a necessity, separates good communicators from excellent ones. Having a sense of humor does not mean telling one joke after another. Instead, you see humor in life, add a witty spark to conversations, do not take yourself too seriously, and appreciate others’ humor.
- Understanding and the ability to interpret are needed in order to achieve a shared meaning. Being a critical thinker with the ability to process and see alternatives can solve communication problems caused by locked-in thinking.
- Patience, often referred to as a virtue, is extremely helpful. Impatient communicators are typically poor listeners.

Positive communication is gratifying to the participants. During an exchange, each may experience frustration; however, gratification often comes with the

outcome. The outcome *could* be a realization that you misunderstood the other. If you learn from mistakes, you can still feel satisfied. Rewards of affirmation, understanding, and intimacy are viable products of healthy communication (Fig. II-2).

If you and I can honestly tell each other who we are, what we think, judge, feel, value, love, honor and esteem, hate, fear, desire, hope for, believe in and are committed to, then and then only can each of us grow.

—John Powell

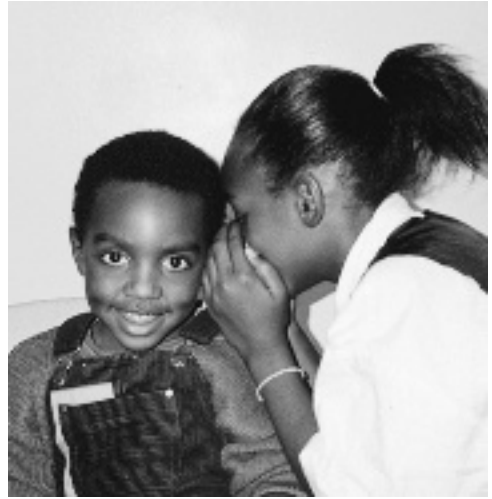


Figure II-2 Communication can be a joyous experience!



BECOMING A POSITIVE LISTENER

LOOKING AHEAD

After completing this chapter, you will be able to

- Differentiate between hearing and listening.
- Give reasons why listening is important.
- Identify barriers to positive listening.
- Understand the importance of body language and verbal responses.
- Describe negative listening behaviors.
- Name and give examples of the types of listening.
- Become a better listener!

Listening is the most profound ingredient of communication. Listening is a hallmark of loving another.

—Teresa Adams

The day care director spoke to an excited group: “Children, you need to listen to your teachers and me.” The bright-eyed children nodded. They had heard about listening at home and knew that it was expected. If we could follow each child from that time until adulthood, we would find that a few had somehow learned to listen well, several had an average skill level, and others were poor listeners. They were told to listen yet not instructed in how. What is often not realized is that good listeners are made, not born.

Understanding the Art of Listening

Positive listening is made up of skills that are learned and can be improved. **Listening** is an active process of paying attention, hearing, interpreting, and then acknowledging. **Hearing**, using the auditory sense to take in a message, is the first step in the process. Understanding, which comes next, depends on an accurate interpretation of both the content and nonverbal clues. Acknowledgment requires activity. If you are a good listener, you are not passive. When you listen positively, you are attentive, involved, stimulated, and animated. The next time you are in

the listener's role, ask yourself, "Am I truly listening? Do I give the impression that I am?" (Fig. 7-1).

The Why of Listening

Listening has purpose. You may listen for any of these reasons.

Enjoyment: Of particular pleasure are the times spent in enjoyable listening. Examples are daily conversations at work and home, the radio, television, and movies.

Information: People seek information from the media and in conversations. Students in the classroom listen primarily to become informed. Enjoyment and listening for information can coincide; often the best listening situations are those that include both. Isn't a classroom more interesting when you are engaged in listening for both information and enjoyment?

Help: You will receive and provide help by listening. Relationships thrive on a positive listening environment.

Whatever the purpose, positive listening in relationships will help you understand another person's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

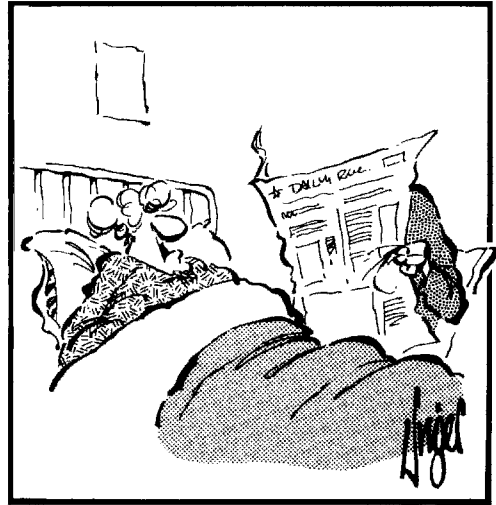
The Importance of Listening

Listening is basic to learning, and people who cannot hear must employ other means to receive messages. Because listening is the first language skill developed by those who hear, all other skills depend on it. Yet listening is often the most neglected subject taught in school. Consider the amount of time students spend listening in classrooms alone and how essential it is that they have good listening skills. If you want to succeed academically, good listening is essential.

The workplace, too, demands good listening skills. Initially, you will receive information and directions during a job interview. Demonstrating good listening skills to get a job is only the beginning. Besides helping employees learn required technical skills, positive listening builds satisfactory customer relations and enriches work relationships. Inefficient or poor listening becomes costly to both businesses and consumers.

Listening creates and improves personal relationships. Being a good listener is a frequently mentioned characteristic of a cherished friend. A person who has difficulty listening may be avoided by others. Satisfying communication in love relationships requires excellent listening skills.

HERMAN®



"I really look forward to your visits."

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True listening is love in action. Yet most couples never truly listen to each other. Consequently, when couples come for counseling or therapy, a major task is to teach them how to listen. (Peck, 1978, p. 128)

In creating and preserving intimacy, listening is the most important of all the communication skills (McKay, Fanning, and Paleg, 1994). Listening has significance throughout the world. In Turkey, a person shows respect by not interrupting; in fact, the longer he or she listens, the more respect is shown. In Japan listening is a sign of authority (Axtell et al., 1997).

Good listeners stand out in a crowd.

They are cherished by family, friends, teachers, and employers.

Good listeners get hired, they get promoted, and they are more informed. (Petress, 1999)

Removing Barriers in the Listening Process

If you are planning a trip by automobile, you can make it more pleasant by knowing about any road construction, poor weather conditions, or detours along the way. Then you can avoid them or at least be prepared to face the delays. Recognizing barriers in the listening process will definitely help you to avoid or decrease their negative effects.

Preoccupation or Lack of Interest

A major obstacle is preoccupation or lack of interest. If you are not interested, you will not want to listen. You have at least three choices. You may listen anyway and attempt to develop an interest. You might pretend to listen, or you can be honest and tell the person you aren't interested. The decision would be based on the situation and your feelings at the time.

Besides disinterest, preoccupation can be caused by other factors. You may have said or heard someone say, "I can listen to you while I am reading the newspaper (or watching television)." People can do more than one thing at a time; however, they are not doing any with complete concentration. Full attention is required if you are going to do your best listening. Carefully listening to someone is a precious gift that communicates care and concern (Miller, Nunnally, and Wackman, 1979). Chronic preoccupation is sure to deaden a relationship. A study designed to predict marital success identified a pattern of listening called stonewalling, a behavior in which the listener presented a "stone wall" to the speaker—not moving the face very much, avoiding eye contact, holding the neck rigid, and not using any listening response. Husbands used this more than wives, and over time it led to marital dissatisfaction (Gottman, 1991).

Environmental Factors

Think about barriers in the environment. Noise detracts, and even with the best intentions, listening is difficult in the middle of an explosion of sounds. Have you ever tried to communicate when a television set is turned on somewhere in

the room? Even if nobody is actively watching, or even if the sound is turned off, the set attracts attention. Visual distractions, temperature, and lack of airflow can be just as bothersome as auditory distractions. The extent of listening I can expect from students is directly related to the climate of the classroom. Important listening situations deserve an environment free of distractions.

Psychological Filter

Of prime importance in the listening process is the listener's psychological filter, which is composed of preconceived ideas, moods, assumptions, labels, stereotypes, past experiences, hopes, memories, and his or her own self-concept. We form impressions of a speaker quickly, and our filters influence what those impressions are. Attitudes predispose us to respond positively or negatively. For example, if you know that you do not agree with a speaker and there will be no opportunity to respond, you will probably not listen well. A negative self-fulfilling prophecy may keep you from even trying to listen. John commented that he has been told often by teachers and parents that he is a poor listener; he believes it and continues the inactive listening behaviors he developed early in life.

As selective listeners, we are capable of filtering out anything we consider unimportant. Obviously, we can miss important and interesting information. Just as a homeowner checks a furnace filter periodically, examining your psychological filter is a good idea. You may not be able to eliminate it entirely, yet being aware of clogging elements and discarding whatever you can will help you become a better listener.

Emotions

A challenging obstacle arises from the listener's emotional state. Think of a heated discussion between you and another person. Any frustration and anger undoubtedly interfered with positive listening. Immediately after Holly saw the low grade she received on an examination, she became extremely depressed. "I totally tuned out everything the professor said about the test and had no idea why I had done so poorly. I did not learn anything that could help me next time." Listening and, thus, our perceptions in general are altered by emotion.

Rate Differences

A person talks at a slower rate than the listener thinks. The average rate of speech is about 125 to 175 words a minute, whereas the brain can think at the rate of 500 to 1,000 words a minute. This means that you, as a listener, are ahead of the speaker! You might think of the speed of an automobile compared to that of a jet airplane. The span of time can hinder your continued concentration, and the mind can wander. Positive listeners remain focused.

Negative Intentions

Although they may not realize it, listeners can have negative intentions. Do you know people who almost always want to lead the conversation? They listen

briefly and then jump to conclusions, interrupt to disagree, and attempt to impose their perspective or solution on the speaker. They do not truly listen; instead, they are thinking about and rehearsing what they will say. Because of this, they frequently interrupt. A similar style of nonlistening comes from wanting always to be right, which can result in lying, shouting, changing the subject, justifying, quibbling, making excuses, and accusing (McKay, Fanning, and Paleg, 1994)—everything except positive listening.

Other negative intentions are listening only enough to gain an advantage or to win, to devise a way to manipulate another, to use the information in a harmful way (as in the case of gossip), or to feign an interest that does not exist. Just as insincere or phony talkers eventually reveal their true colors, listeners with negative intentions generally end up losers in interpersonal relationships.

Improving Listening Behaviors

Eliminating any of the barriers sets up a positive listening atmosphere. Being aware of your own behaviors, improving your skills, and becoming active will lead to positive listening.

Open and Attentive Body Position

Do you appear to be listening? The way you position yourself in relation to the speaker makes a difference. Establishing a comfortable distance apart is basic. Physical space zones are covered in Chapter 8. Being on the same level sets the tone for the interchange, because if one stands and the other sits, the person seated can feel at a disadvantage. Facing the speaker is essential. Turning your body away carries a message of disinterest and lessens your involvement, whereas facing the speaker squarely and leaning slightly forward demonstrates attentiveness.

Adopting an open, attentive posture indicates interest, openness, and involvement. Sitting with legs and arms crossed, slouching, or leaning away from the speaker is likely to give negative impressions. Instead, you can sit with your hands at your sides or on your lap. In situations such as a job interview, you appear more professional if you keep your feet together on the floor. A slumped posture may be comfortable, yet if you are truly interested, your body reflects it by an upright position. Having attentive posture does not mean being rigid and tense. A relaxed position of openness and attentiveness is ideal.

Positive Eye Contact

Maintaining eye contact in U.S. society is expected. In fact, conversation usually does not even start until eye contact is made. A person who does not look at you or who often avoids eye contact can cause discomfort. Employers will likely have negative impressions of applicants who don't keep their eyes on the interviewer. Poor eye contact may be interpreted as a lack of confidence or as indicative of dishonesty or lying. Knowledge of various cultures is important. For example, a student from the Middle East commented that direct eye contact is discouraged in his society. In other societies looking down rather than at the speaker is considered respectful.

Knowing how important eye contact can be and being able to actually maintain it may be altogether different. A student said, “Sharon, I hope in your book you will do more than just say, ‘Have good eye contact.’ I already know that, but how?” First, realize that eye contact is almost never a direct meeting between pairs of eyes. You do not have to look squarely into a speaker’s eyes; you can focus anywhere on the face, including the nose, mouth, or ear. As long as you are at least 18 inches away from the speaker, the person usually cannot tell that you are not maintaining exact eye contact.

A recommendation is to look at the speaker’s face for roughly three quarters of the time, in glances lasting from 1 to 7 seconds. A speaker will look at a listener for less than half the time, and these intermittent glances rarely last for more than a second (Marsh, 1988). Staring is definitely not recommended. Knowing that you can look elsewhere and keeping a relaxed frame of mind make it easier to maintain eye contact.

Facial Expression

To a great extent, feedback is delivered by changes in facial expression. A “poker face” is helpful in a card game; it is generally useless, and often demeaning, in the listening process. A positive listener reacts to what is being said by registering thinking and feeling responses. Avoiding inappropriate facial expressions is also very important. A smile, a frown, and a look of bewilderment or surprise are just a few of the expressions your face can make. Actually, about 20,000 different facial expressions are possible (Carl, 1980). Changing your facial expression is not that difficult! Look into a mirror and actually practice changing your expressions. Joel said, “I know it is important to smile, but I hate the way my teeth look.” He finally decided that getting his teeth fixed was worth the price he had been paying in decreased relationship skills.

Head and Body Movements

One of my favorite listening behaviors is nodding the head. An affirmative nod shows the speaker not only that you have heard but also that you agree. A nod can motivate and energize a speaker. “Nodders” are worth their weight in gold! Even a side-to-side nod indicating confusion or disagreement can be helpful in arriving at a shared meaning. Nodding can be developed. You may want to tell yourself to do so until the behavior becomes natural. Since it is possible to nod too much, be sure to use the movement moderately and when appropriate. Other body movements such as tilting the head to one side or shrugging the shoulders also provide feedback to the speaker. Certain listening gestures and sounds can bother the speaker and create a negative communication climate. Several are identified by Ernst (1973):

- Cheek puffing and corners of mouth going down
- Eye rolling
- Shoulder shrugging to indicate an I-do not-care attitude
- Foot or leg bouncing up and down at high speed
- Drumming the fingers or thumping the hand or arm
- A “tishing” sound made by the tongue, or sighing

Students in role-playing activities have added a few of their own, such as loud gum chewing, yawning, and knuckle-cracking. Can you identify the negative messages these behaviors might communicate? If you recognize any of the behaviors in yourself, try to eliminate or at least decrease them.

Touching

Depending on your relationship with the speaker, listening can be improved by an appropriate touch. One day a student came in to talk about a personal conflict and was having difficulty expressing herself. I reached over and touched her hand, and the words poured out. The touch had evidently reassured her that she could speak freely. Even though touching can serve as a positive listening behavior, be sure that it is appropriate and acceptable to the other person.

Verbal Responses

Listening is usually a nonverbal activity; however, verbal responses are also included in positive listening. These can vary from a simple “Oh” or “Hmm” to “I see” or “That sounds interesting.” You can, however, use too many responses and literally interrupt the speaker’s flow. “Really,” “I know,” or “I understand” stated after each comment is distracting and annoying. A question that encourages the speaker to continue is an excellent response. Some possibilities are: “How do you feel about that?” “What are your alternatives?” “What happened next?” If you are an attentive listener, your question will not move the conversation away from the point. Note the difference in these two examples.

1. SPEAKER: I am upset with my supervisor. She scheduled me to work this weekend after I told her I wanted the time off.
LISTENER: Did she just get mixed up?
2. SPEAKER: I am upset with my supervisor. She scheduled me to work this weekend after I told her I wanted the time off.
LISTENER: Well, did you hear that she fired Joe?

Open questions requiring more than a simple yes or no answer are preferred because they are encouraging and move the conversation forward. You are telling the speaker, “What you are saying is of interest, and I want to hear more.”

Verbal responses can involve more than short reactions or questions. **Paraphrasing** is restating in your own words what you think the speaker said. Here is an example of paraphrasing.

- SPEAKER: My kids have been driving me crazy.
LISTENER: It sounds like you are really bothered by them.

When you paraphrase, you do not add to the message; instead, you repeat the meaning you received. This shows that you received the message and want to be sure the meaning is shared. You can use such lead-ins as, “It sounds like,” “You mean that,” or “Let me make sure I understand what you mean.” Paraphrasing

may seem clumsy at first; yet once you find and practice a few phrases that sound natural, using them will become easier.

The benefits of paraphrasing are worth the initial discomfort. They include:

- People appreciate that they were heard.
- The possibility of misinterpretation is greatly reduced because errors can be corrected immediately.
- Anger and other emotions can be defused.
- What was said is more likely to be remembered.

Paraphrasing can work beautifully with children, who often just want to know that their message was received. For example, picture a 4-year-old girl who tearfully tells you that an older brother has yelled at her. “It sounds like you didn’t like him to yell at you” is the parent’s paraphrase. In most cases, the child will nod and return to whatever she was doing.

Gaining a clear understanding of the speaker’s emotions is also helpful. Jason tells Anja that he is “down in the dumps.” She says, “It sounds as if you are really depressed.” Jason can then think about her impression. He may respond, “I’m not really that unhappy,” or he can say, “Yes, I am really down.” When the listener provides an idea of the feeling that is sensed, the speaker receives valuable information. The speaker may also feel free to elaborate further about the feeling and even express other emotions. A listener who echoes a feeling is essentially saying, “I’m here for you.”

Clarifying goes just a little further than paraphrasing. You not only restate, but you also ask questions to get more information and background. Your questions are genuine attempts to ensure that the two of you are sharing the same meaning. In doing so, both the exchange and the relationship are enriched. Even if you don’t agree with the speaker, positive listening means that you first do everything possible to understand the other’s perception.

Feedback, the last step in the listening process, comes after other listening behaviors. **Feedback** is responding with what you, as the listener, think, feel, or sense. You may still clarify with questions such as, “Is this what you meant?” or “Is this the way you feel?” Then you respond with your perspective or point of view. A few tips for engaging in feedback are:

- Provide input in a timely way.
- Be honest, yet react in a nonhurtful way. Avoid beginning your response with the word “you.” Instead of “You would be crazy to take a job for that kind of pay,” say “I think you would be wise to consider how satisfied you will be with that pay.”
- Support the speaker. Do not put the speaker down. If you are entrusted with thoughts and feelings, handle them with care.

Feedback is more accurate if you have paid attention to the speaker’s nonverbal behavior, voice, and words. For example, a friend’s son responded to a question of where he was going with, “Over to my friend’s house for a while.” The mother noticed his facial expression, which appeared hostile. Her thought was that he really did not like her, and she was glad that she asked him if she had done

something to offend him. He looked genuinely surprised and said, “No. What makes you think that?” She gave him feedback by describing what she thought his face was saying and how she felt. He laughed and said, “I probably looked mad because I was thinking about my car’s empty gas tank!”

Tone of voice can be confusing to a listener, and again, feedback is appropriate. Judy said to her friend, “I am just fine. I do not need any help.” The words said one thing, and her weak, quivering voice revealed another meaning. Her friend responded with concern. Usually, the quality of voice is more honest; however, a good listener will check to make sure. Are you surprised by the number and complexity of listening behaviors? Can you see why listening is considered active and animated?

Elimination of Negative Listening Behaviors

Knowing what to do is essential; knowing *what not to do* is equally important. The opposites or extremes of the behaviors just described are obvious negatives. For example, have you ever tried to describe a serious incident to a listener who is slightly grinning?

Interrupting is common and is one of the surest signs that a person is not truly listening. Individuals who enjoy talking have more difficulty with this bothersome behavior. Families composed of outgoing, talkative members can have frustrating scenes. A conversation starts. Instead of remaining attentive, the listener begins to speak about a different topic. The speaker can either stop, continue with the original topic, or switch to accommodate the interrupter. If the speaker stays with the first topic, a two-way conversation results and shared meaning is completely lost.

Using Different Types of Listening

All listening is not the same, even though the active listening behaviors described earlier are essential ingredients in all positive communication exchanges. Different types of listening are most effective in certain situations.

Empathic Listening

Empathy—being able to put yourself in another’s place and see and hear from that person’s perspective—is a quality to be treasured. **Empathic listening** means that you first become aware of the speaker’s experiences and feelings. Then you communicate this. A comment such as, “I can see why you feel (or think) that way” makes an exchange more pleasant and positive.

Because emotional expression is beneficial, an empathic listener has a worthwhile role. As was pointed out in Chapter 5, people can have difficulty verbalizing feelings. A safe, comfortable climate for communication encourages expression, and an empathic listener sets the tone. Instead of just reacting to the words you hear, listen with concern and caring. For example, when a mother says, “I wish you just were not so busy,” she may sound critical and angry; however, she could be

feeling disappointed, hurt, and sad. An empathic listener is likely to recognize the difference or probe to discover the underlying emotions. Listening in depth and with empathy makes it easier to effectively help others and is an appreciated skill.

A communication empathy scale, proposed by Messina (1982), is a good way to check your empathic listening. Pretend that a friend has just told you that he has lost his job. Following are descriptions of four levels and examples of responses.

Level 1: Listener misses the facts and the feeling—“Let’s go get a bite to eat.”

Level 2: Listener grasps facts but misses the feeling—“It’s too bad you lost your job, but something else will come along.”

Level 3: Listener understands the facts and realizes that the speaker has a feeling but isn’t empathic enough to be correct about which one—“It’s too bad you lost your job. I’ll bet you’re really mad.”

Level 4: Listener correctly understands both—“I realize that losing a job is a bad deal. It sounds like you’re upset and depressed, and I can see why.”

The fourth level is a worthy goal. Notice that the use of the word “but” in Level 2 seems to negate the speaker’s situation.

Empathic listeners express empathy by tone of voice and body language. In addition, they can use short verbal responses. Some listeners are quick to say, “I know just how you feel.” Such a response is not recommended. Even though people can empathize, they do not know just how another feels. A better response would be, “I have a strong sense of how you feel.” Can you detect the use of empathic listening in the following?

SPEAKER: I was trying to lead the group discussion, and she kept interrupting. I felt like she thought that I was not handling it right.

LISTENER: It sounds like you were in a difficult spot.

SPEAKER: I tried to politely tell her to quit distracting us, but she kept doing it.

LISTENER: I would have been frustrated.

SPEAKER: I was really frustrated, and by the time the evening was over, I was ready to scream.

LISTENER: I can almost feel what you were going through. It sounds like it kept building up until you were really angry.

SPEAKER: That is right. I am glad you understand.

Note that the listener expressed a personal sense of frustration and then picked up on the escalation to anger. The “I can almost feel” phrase is much more honest than “I know exactly how you feel.”

Empathic listening is desirable in most exchanges. Once in a while you can better serve the speaker by being objective and honest. If the person is in a rut or is demonstrating inappropriate feelings, first express your understanding. Then, because empathizing would validate the person’s inappropriate emotional reaction, use feedback to express your true reaction in a nonthreatening way.

Receptive Listening

All listening is receptive; however, **receptive listening** is a specific type with certain restrictions placed on responses. In some cases, silence is best if accompanied by appropriate nonverbal behaviors. Perhaps it is no coincidence that “silent” and “listen” contain the same letters (Wolvin and Coakley, 1988). When using receptive listening, you will do the following.

Listen without interrupting. Except for preventing an injury, nothing justifies interrupting, and it is extremely annoying in a conversation. Keep silent, and if you do interrupt, apologize and let the speaker continue.

Listen without judging or “putting down.” People seem to have great difficulty keeping critical, judgmental, and admonishing reactions to themselves.

SPEAKER: I charged over \$1,000 on my credit card bill this month.

LISTENER: Oh, no! (in a horrified tone of voice)

SPEAKER: I have a budget, but I just could not pass up buying stuff and going away for a weekend.

LISTENER: That is crazy. You know better than that.

What do you think the speaker’s reaction would be? Most people would react defensively and, usually, the interaction would end on a negative note. Note the following improvement.

SPEAKER: I charged over \$1,000 on my credit card bill this month.

LISTENER: Oh. (In a neutral, somewhat concerned tone.)

SPEAKER: I have a budget, but I just could not pass up buying stuff and going away for a weekend.

LISTENER: That is too bad. Are you going to be able to pay for all of it?

Listening openly is not easy and requires patience. Later, in the feedback stage, the listener can express any concerns. Being judgmental will only cut off further communication.

One reason that individuals do not express their feelings is that judgments are frequently leveled at emotions. “How could you be angry about that?” “That is stupid,” “I would not have let that bother me,” or one of the worst, “You have no right to feel that way,” are almost sure to prevent further disclosures of emotion. Ironically, judging can be so ingrained that we tend to use it even in simple exchanges. For example, you may have told someone you enjoyed a movie and then been told, “Oh, I don’t see how anyone could like something like that.” In Chapter 8 you will learn ways to voice an opinion that does not sound like a judgment.

Listen without one-upping. When I present this in class, the reactions clearly indicate how common this response is. “One-uppers” have a definite intent, which is to tell their own story because it is more dramatic, more interesting,

better, or worse than yours. In some cases, one-uppers just react from habit or because they want to relate to the speaker's experiences. Whatever the reason, to be one-upped is annoying.

SPEAKER: I went fishing yesterday and caught two bass. I—

LISTENER: (interrupting) That is nothing! I caught six last week.

SPEAKER: I have been really depressed because my favorite aunt died a few days ago.

LISTENER: I know just how you feel. My grandmother died a few months ago, and I'm still trying to get over it. She was such a wonderful person, and we all loved her. Why, just before she died, she was helping my cousins settle an argument . . . (Story would continue!)

SPEAKER: I'm really excited. We are leaving for Mexico next week.

LISTENER: You are going to Mexico? I am going to Europe. I will be in England a few days, then on to Scotland, then to France. I will be gone for at least four weeks, then I am going to . . .

When role playing the last conversation, after the listener stopped, the speaker said loudly, "And I hope your plane goes down!" The laughter indicated that any of us would probably harbor similar thoughts! Notice the lead-in of "That's nothing!" in the first example. Besides preceding a one-upping comment, the phrase is negating and is one to avoid.

Do you recognize anyone, even yourself, as a "one-upper"? Awareness can eliminate or decrease most of its use. Remember not to jump in too quickly and sound as if your story is better. If you slip, acknowledge that you took over the conversation and lead the speaker back to the original story.

Listen without advice giving and problem solving. Caring individuals have difficulty with this one. They want to be helpful, so they are quick with advice, not realizing that it can stop the exchange prematurely. Either feeling or thinking MBTI personality preferences can respond too quickly. Thinkers do so because they enjoy problem solving, and it's logical to do so as quickly as possible. Feelers can experience so much empathy; they just feel compelled to help.

(Advice giving)

SPEAKER: I'm having trouble communicating with my parents.

LISTENER: I can suggest several good books for you to read.

(Problem solving)

SPEAKER: I am upset about my relationship with him.

LISTENER: I think you should just call it quits.

Can you see how the quick response can end the exchange or steer it in another direction? A better response would be to paraphrase or express understanding of the feeling when appropriate or show that you are receptive just by body language. In most cases, the speaker has more to express verbally, nonverbally, or both.

I was reminded of the importance of listening without attempting to problem-solve when one of my students stayed after class. She looked sad, and I asked her how she was. She replied, “Just terrible. I’ve been sick, and now my husband has started drinking again.” I stifled a strong urge to tell her about support groups for families of alcoholics and books she could read. Instead, my facial expression was one of concern. I said, “Oh,” and because she looked so forlorn, I put my arms around her. She started to cry, and we stood there for about two minutes while she sobbed. Afterwards, we talked, and I eventually made some suggestions. If I had responded immediately with my well-meaning advice, the opportunity for her to release stress and genuine emotion would have been lost.

Receptive listening means that you remain in the listening role longer and don’t jump in too soon. Think of it as keeping an invisible piece of tape over your mouth for awhile. Show encouragement nonverbally or with short responses.

Directive Listening

This type of listening is more controlling than either empathic or receptive listening, and the listener is more verbal. Asking questions is the key technique. Five different types of questions can be used; they are listed here in the order of most to least effective (Miller et al., 1988).

Open questions: These usually begin with who, what, where, when, or how, but not why. Open questions allow the speaker choices and encourage longer responses.

Multiple questions: These ask for more than one answer at a time. They flood the speaker, and the questioner often does not get the desired information. For example, a job interviewer who asks, “What are your strengths and weaknesses and how might you improve?” is unlikely to get complete responses in each area.

Closed questions: These are questions that can be answered with just one or a few words.

Leading questions: These are designed to get a certain response. For example, “Don’t you think you’d be wise to check the benefits they are offering?” is a disguised way of telling the other person what to do.

“Why” questions: “Why” questions often cause reactions of defensiveness and tension. Instead of using “why,” try “How did you go about making that decision?” or “What reasons did you have for that choice?”

Directive listening is appropriate when you want to resolve issues efficiently or make decisions quickly. Job interviews, other business exchanges, and consultations employ directive listening. And, at times, parents feel a need to use it as well! Knowing how to direct conversations with effective questions is a practical skill.

Listening is of great significance in the communication process. Take the opportunity to check your own listening on a scale in Reflections and Applications. Then use positive listening to create an open communication climate that leads to healthy relationships (Reflect and Apply).

REFLECT AND APPLY**Reflect**

- ◆ *Think of examples of when you listen for enjoyment, for information, or for help, plus situations in which you listen for more than one reason.*
- ◆ *Select a particular barrier and think of the last time it hindered the listening process.*
- ◆ *Recall a situation in which empathic listening was used. Do the same for directive listening.*

Apply

- ◆ *With a partner, practice both negative and positive listening behaviors.*
- ◆ *Use receptive listening when someone shares an experience with you.*

LOOKING BACK

- Listening is an active process of attending, receiving, and interpreting auditory stimuli and then providing feedback. Listening well includes observing and interpreting nonverbal behaviors and reacting to a speaker. Listening goes beyond hearing because it involves interpretation and responding. Listening skills can be learned and improved.
- Individuals listen for various reasons. Three purposes are to enjoy, to become informed, and to help. A goal of listening is to share a common meaning with another person.
- Positive listening cannot be overemphasized. In work situations, friendships, and family relationships, listening is the key to healthy interactions. Poor listening creates problems.
- As important as listening is, almost everyone learned to do it informally. Little, if any, formal instruction is offered in school curriculums. Becoming a positive listener is an individual's responsibility.
- General barriers to listening are preoccupation, environmental factors, psychological filters, emotions, different rates of speaking and thinking, and negative intentions.
- Improvement comes from eliminating barriers and demonstrating positive nonverbal and verbal behaviors.
- Paraphrasing, clarifying, and delivering feedback are important skills. Negative listening behaviors can be identified and eliminated.
- All listening is active. Specific types include empathic, receptive, and directive forms of listening.