

## One thing you can do to improve your relationship: Learn to Listen

In my experience, the most common issue I see (and often the simplest to remedy) with couples or individuals seeking to improve relationships has to do with communication skills, and more specifically, listening skills. You may be reading this and saying to yourself, *“That’s not my problem. I’m already a good listener.”* If you are, you are one of the few. Many of us THINK we’re good listeners but most of us in our culture mistake fixing for listening. Ask yourself: *Am I listening for problems and trying to come up with solutions? Do I interrupt my partner and immediately offer ideas to fix something?*

Are you surprised when your partner reacts when you’re just offering ideas and trying to help? That’s because, if we don’t ask for it, most of us don’t want suggestions. What we want is to be heard.

- **Most people don’t want fixing, they just want to be heard.**

I know that it’s hard when you hear someone you care about complaining about a problem. You want to help. But unless it is requested, help means listening and showing the speaker that you heard. (Try asking yourself what you want when you’re discussing your day or talking about something serious. Do you want to be interrupted? Do you want someone to tell you how to fix things?)

- **If your partner keeps bringing up the same things again and again, it’s likely that they aren’t feeling heard.**

Here are some basic listening DO’s and DON’Ts:

**DON’T:** Assume your partner wants fixing.

**DON’T:** Listen for problems and offer solutions. A wise person once told me, *“Unsolicited advice is always seen as criticism.”* That is true, even if you just want to help.

**DO:** Start by assuming that your partner wants to be heard. Perhaps ask your partner what he/she wants from you. Ask, *“Are you looking for advice?”* or *“Do you just want to be heard?”* or maybe *“How can I help?”*

(If your partner has SPECIFICALLY asked for advice, then go ahead and give it. Otherwise, keep it to yourself.)

- **Unsolicited advice is always seen as criticism.**

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**DON’T:** Try to multitask. I know it’s tempting, and you may be good at hearing and solving multiple problems simultaneously. That’s not listening, and your partner can sense that they don’t have your full attention.

**DON’T:** Keep working on the computer, playing your video game, watching the TV, looking at your phone, washing the dishes, etc.

**DO:** Turn away from the computer, turn off the TV, etc. and give your partner your full attention.

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**DON'T:** Tolerate listening while there is something else on your mind.

**DO:** If you're distracted and can't give your full attention, tell your partner. Say, *"I'd like to hear what you're saying but I'm really distracted by \_\_\_\_."* or *"It sounds like this is really important to you and I want to hear it, can you give me five minutes while I finish with \_\_\_\_."*

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**DON'T:** Argue. If your partner is sharing her/his feelings, they are not to be questioned.

**DON'T:** Disagree when someone tells you how they feel. You might think they should feel differently but that's not relevant. What is important is how your partner feels, NOT how you feel.

**DO:** Be respectful of your partner's feelings.

- **Do not disagree with someone else's feelings. They aren't yours.**
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**DON'T:** Try to persuade. If your partner wants you to listen, they don't need anything from you but a clear signal that you're listening. Persuading says, *"I think you're wrong."*

**DO:** Just listen.

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**DON'T:** Give a grunt or short response such as *"Uh huh."* or *"Ok."* This is not an indication that you've heard and understood.

**DON'T:** Parrot back exactly what your partner has said. This usually sounds like mocking.

**DO:** Summarize what you've heard and confirm that she/he feels heard. *"It sounds like you're having an issue at work."* or *"It sounds like you're pretty upset about this."* and *"Did I get that right?"* or *"Are you feeling heard?"*

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**DON'T:** Panic. I know that most of these DO's and DON'Ts are easier said than done. They take practice and time.

**DO:** Start by having a discussion with your partner about how each of you wants the other to listen. Then notice how you are listening. The rest is practice, practice, practice.