

# Active Listening Skills (“Empathic Listening”)

## WA State Employee Assistance Program

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Intense emotions together with a perceived loss of control could trigger acts of aggression, (nonverbal, verbal, or physical). A communication technique called “active listening” can help the individual to regain control of their own emotions and behavior and decrease the risk of a more violent incident.

First steps:

- Maintain your own control. Stay centered breath slowly and evenly. Lower your voice.
- Stay calm, caring, attentive, and concerned. Act professionally.
- Ask questions but don’t be judgmental. Seek to understand what the person is feeling or wanting behind the angry behavior.

Active Listening Tips:

- Introduce yourself, let them know why you are there, and ask how you can help. The earlier you can engage a person in conversation, the more likely they can regain control.
- Focus on the speaker. Ask permission to use their first name.
- Stay objective. Don’t react to what is being said. And don’t take their words personally.
- Listen attentively without planning your next statement as you are listening. Don’t try to problem solve.
- Minimize distractions.
- Listen for key words the person is saying.

Following the customer:

Use your language and body sincerely to encourage the person’s train of thought. Use phrases like:

### Phrases

“I see.....”

“Hmmm” or “mmhmm”

“Uh huh”

“Oh?”

“Right” “Really?”

“Please, go on”

“Sure”

“I understand”

“Use attentive silence”

### Body language/posture

Nod your head

Reflect facial expressions

Maintain periodic eye contact

Incline your body toward the speaker

Face them squarely

Maintain an open position – avoid arms crossed  
(this is like a principal’s office)

Be aware of personal space

**Reflecting Skills – Paraphrase or summarize**

- Restating the customer's concerns
  - Shows you are listening
  - Demonstrates you are interested
  - Gives the speaker feedback on how their message is being expressed
- Restate the essence of what someone said to verify what you heard and understood
  - "So, you are suggesting....."
  - "If I understand you correctly....."
  - "Sounds like you are feeling."
- Offer opportunities for the customer to correct or clarify your understanding.
- Use open-ended questions to clarify points (who, what, where, when, why, how).
- Do not give an opinion unless specifically asked.

**Problem solving**

Often when a person feels "heard" their anxiety or anger will be defused. Once you understand the Issues and the person has calmed down, you can begin to find mutually agreeable solutions.

**Setting Limits:**

The situation will dictate if setting limits is the right approach. Setting limits forces compliance and can be used only when the person is cognitively aware. It does not work in some situations, such as a person with dementia.

**Next steps if active listening doesn't work:**

1. Validate reality, and then identify what behavior is causing the problem.
  - "I can understand why you are so upset, John. I need you to lower your voice."
2. Explain why the behavior is causing the problem.
  - "Others here are upset when they hear loud voices." Or..... "It upsets me to hear you so loud and angry."
3. You can't control other people's behavior, but you can give them choices. State the positive choice first then the negative consequence, otherwise the person will react and won't hear the positive choice.
  - "When you lower your voice, we'll talk about what to do." "If you raise your voice again, we will need to stop for the day."
4. Give time to choose so that it doesn't seem like a threat or an ultimatum. Don't be afraid of "white space (silence)"
  - "I'll be right back and you can tell me your decision"
5. Enforce consequences – this is the most important step.
  - "You need to leave the building now."

**What happens if you don't enforce consequences?**

They won't believe you or change their behavior.

**Active Listening Techniques**

<b>Types</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Clarifying	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To get additional Facts</li> <li>2. To help the speaker explore all sides of the problem.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "Can you clarify this?"</li> <li>2. "Do you mean this.....?"</li> <li>3. "Is this the problem as you see it?"</li> </ol>
Paraphrasing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To check your meaning and interpretation with the customer.</li> <li>2. to show you are listening and that you understand what is said.</li> <li>3. to encourage the speaker to analyze other aspects of matters being considered and to discuss them with you.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "As I understand it, your plan is...."</li> <li>2. "This is what you have decided to do and the reasons are....."</li> </ol>
Neutral	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To convey that you are listening and interested</li> <li>2. To encourage the person to continue talking</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "I see."</li> <li>2. "Uh huh."</li> <li>3. "That's very interesting."</li> <li>4. "I understand."</li> </ol>
Reflective	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To show that you understand.</li> <li>2. To help the person to evaluate feelings as expressed to someone else</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "You feel that...."</li> <li>2. "It was shocking."</li> </ol>
Summarizing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To bring all the discussion into focus in terms of a summary.</li> <li>2. to serve as a springboard for further discussion on a new aspect of the problem.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "These are the key ideas expressed...." "If I understand how you feel about the situation..."</li> </ol>