

## Tips for Effective Listening

1. **Timing is important.** If someone has called or stopped by to talk with you unexpectedly, think for a moment about the time you have and the mental space you are in. Is this a time you can be available to speak with her? If not, size up the nature of her concern and its urgency, and ask if you can make another time to talk when you can give her your full attention. This doesn't mean being rude, or cutting her off abruptly. Instead, if you and she feel the conversation can wait, say "I'd really like to talk with you about this when I can be more available – would later (tonight, tomorrow) work for you?"
2. **Prepare to listen.** Create a mental and physical listening space. Turn off the radio, music, television, or other sources of distraction. Save the document on your computer, close your book or study notes, sign out of First Class or anything else you were engaged in before the conversation, so that you mentally remind yourself you've "stepped into" a different role and activity. If possible, take care of things that feel immediately pressing or like a source of distraction before you start the conversation. Don't try to do something else at the same time you are trying to listen.
3. **A welcoming approach.** People who seek you out with important questions or concerns may be feeling uncomfortable with the step they have taken to talk with you. Think about what makes a person feel comfortable or safe. A warm, caring open approach can help set the tone. Welcome the person by quietly conveying you are glad they came to speak with you.
4. **Tune in.** Sometimes a person might have a hard time getting right to the point, especially if they are trying to talk about something difficult. Tuning in can help you pay attention to the point or questions that is on their mind. Why are they seeking you out? Do they seem distressed, embarrassed, confused? Listen to the tone of their voice – is it soft and hesitant? Are they on the verge of tears or crying? Are they angry or upset? Do they seem afraid? Confused? By paying attention to both the content of what they say and how they say it, you can often get a fuller picture of what is really going on.
5. **Furthering the conversation.** Asking questions, nodding, small verbal responses all indicate that you are "there" – tuned in, receiving the information. Sometimes restating or reflecting what they've said helps make sure you are on track with her. "So you are saying..." Asking questions can also help draw the person out a bit more – "Do you mean...?" "Can you say more...?" This doesn't mean interrogating the person. Too many questions can feel intrusive, or "pushy" – but an occasional question can help clarify things, or move the dialogue along. The purpose of questions is for you to understand her better, and to help her convey what she needs to say; it isn't to satisfy your curiosity, or get her to disclose more than she may feel ready.

6. **Silence is important.** Even though questions and comments can be important, often listening is the most important part of what you do. Just being an open, interested and supportive person, you are providing important assistance to someone who wants to talk with someone. Listening involves really attending to all of what the person is saying, and not just “biding time” until they finish so you can jump in with your comment. Don’t interrupt someone in the middle of their taking, or finish their sentence for them. Try pausing before you speak to consider what the person said, and to allow time for you to reflect before answering or commenting.
7. **Actions speak loudly.** Nonverbal messages can be as important a part of communication as verbal ones. If this is a face-to-face encounter, look at the person as they are speaking and turn your body to face them. Sit upright and try not to cross your arms, or otherwise convey a “closed” attitude. Your facial expressions can convey important empathy, interest and connection with the speaker.
8. **Empathy.** Empathy means being able to put yourself into the shoes of the other person, to “get” what they are experiencing, even if you haven’t experienced this directly yourself. Be careful not to judge people who feel very differently from you. At the same time, remember this is their experience, not yours, so watch out for “over-identifying.” Someone else’s questions or concerns about their body, identity or sexual activities are not the same as yours.
9. **Confidentiality.** Of course, when someone shares something deeply personal, it’s important that you keep her confidence by not sharing this information casually with others. However, avoid making blanket promises of confidentiality that might make it harder for you to share your concerns with someone else, if needed. If your friend is at risk, it is important that you seek professional help right away and let them know the reasons for your concern-even if the student has asked you not to. A student’s safety must be the primary concern.
10. **Limits of helping.** While your role as a peer helper can be essential in helping someone talk through an issue, get a question answered or receive support, there are also limits to what you can do. Don’t let yourself get in over your head. A student may present you with a situation or questions you don’t have the answer to – that is something we all encounter, and that’s okay. Don’t give information you are uncertain of, but offer to consult or refer her to someone else if needed. Also, as much as it can be hard to listen to someone who is in distress or struggling with a decision, giving advice is not usually what is wanted or useful. Instead, you can help them think through what next steps they may want or need to take, if any. If you start to feel too burdened, overwhelmed or concerned with another student, it’s time to ask a professional for help. We are a community!