

Are You All Ears: Connecting with Clients through Active-Mindful Listening

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Active-mindful listening is one skill that every SLP needs to be an effective service provider for clients and families with communication disorders. This skill can be practiced and can enhance client and family wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, and rapport building.

Listening and Counseling and Our Job

ASHA Scope of Practice (2016) reported that an important component of evidence-based practice is client values and preferences. **Active and effective listening skills** are needed to determine best treatment to meet the personal needs and improve quality of life of clients.

Listening skills are necessary to address components of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) such as activity and participation, or the extent to which clients carry out tasks, and are involved in life; environmental factors, or the “physical, social, and attitudinal” landscapes in which clients live; and personal factors, which include background, culture, and client reactions (ASHA, 2016).

Since clients come from a variety of cultural contexts, it is important that SLPs **listen** carefully to what clients and families value to provide therapy that is culturally appropriate.

Empathy and Mindful Listening

One of the greatest values we can use with active/mindful listening is empathy. Empathetic listening “is feeling the other person’s feelings. It’s like going onto their island and experiencing their reality, rather than staying on your home turf and filtering what they say through your reality” (Treasures, p. 152). The more we can connect with a client and family through empathetic listening and engagements, the more genuine we become. This can build trust, which is another important value for an effective relationship.

Importance of Active/ Mindful Listening

Luterman (2017) emphasized the importance of listening to clients when he wrote, “All we need to do is listen deeply to our clients; we validate their experience through our nonjudgmental listening” (p. 8). The

basic principles of mindfulness are examining the present moment on purpose and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). By becoming mindful with our listening skills, we can impact not only the wellbeing of clients and families, but we can add “to the richness of your reality and enhancing your wellbeing, effectiveness and happiness” (Treasures, 2017, p.134).

Treasures (2017) wrote that active listening “involves intention, focus, reflection and summarizing” (p. 150). Treasures further discussed Conscious Listening with FOUR Cs (p. 161 - 162): commitment, consciousness, compassion (or care), and curiosity. Others, like Maliszewski (2017), defined active listening as “suspending our own beliefs and what we think we know, and immersing ourselves in the others' story.” Yates further wrote that active listening can help us “gain more information, improve your understanding of other points of view, and work cooperatively” (p.1).

Psychology and Neurology

Kemper (1992) suggested that listening is a psychological and sensory experience where a person’s entire body gets involved. Treasures wrote perceptions of listening “happens between our ears” (p.111), referring to brain functioning, which Maliszewski said “activates the brain’s *mirror neuron system*.” Activating mirrors is “linked with our ability to be empathetic, understand others actions, and learn.” Further neurological studies by Kawamachi, et al. (2015) suggested that actively listening activates reward centers in the brain. This suggests that if SLPs practice active and mindful listening a client’s brain might perceive the experiences as a reward.

Some Tips to Practice

Pickering (1986) created a list of Empathic Listening behaviors:

1. Attending, acknowledging as well as providing verbal or non-verbal awareness of the other, (i.e., eye contact).
2. Restating, paraphrasing, and responding to a person's basic verbal message.
3. Reflecting feelings, experiences, or content that has been heard or perceived through cues.
4. Interpreting, offering a tentative interpretation about the other's feelings, desires, or meanings.
5. Summarizing, synthesizing, and bringing together in some way feelings and experiences; providing a focus.
6. Probing, questioning in a supportive way that requests more information or that attempts to clear up confusions.

