

The art of listening

Are we listening?

Once you start observing conversations, you'll quickly recognize that most people are terrible listeners.

Even if they ask a question, they're often not patient or aware enough to listen to your answer. Before you can finish what you're trying to say, they'll try to interpret what you're saying, give advice, or say something from their own life. Whatever comes to their mind.

If you're lucky, they'll let you finish one sentence. And when you take a short break to think about how to express best what you're trying to say, they'll jump in. They take advantage of your pause, and off they go.

Good listeners are rare

Maybe that's why we pay so much money for therapists—so we have someone to truly listen to us. Often, that's enough for us to figure out our own problems. When we get to speak, we're able to bring order to our thoughts, and suddenly we realize what's been causing our struggles.

Good listeners are valuable

Maybe that's why the Stoics advised to listen intentionally. Because that helps the other person. That's what many people need, someone to truly listen to them.

Acquire the habit of attending carefully to what is being said by another, and of entering, so far as possible, into the mind of the speaker.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 6.53

That should go without saying, but whenever we listen, we should pay at-



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tention to what's being said so we can actually understand what the speaker is trying to express.

The goal when you enter a conversation is to understand what the other person wants to tell you. You listen with the intention to understand. That's called *empathic listening*. And it'll massively improve your relationships.

Resist the urge to speak

Accept that something within you always wants to respond immediately. It wants to add something to the conversation. But often, that's not necessary and even detrimental to the conversation. Marcus describes it well:

In conversation, one should attend closely to what is being said, and with

regard to every impulse attend to what arises from it; in the latter case, to see from the first what end it has in view, and in the former, to keep careful watch on what people are meaning to say.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7.4

Pay attention to the other person

Your main question should be: What is the other person trying to express?

Listen to what's being said and take accompanying emotions into consideration as well. That's how you foster understanding and connection between you and the speaker.

The Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius wrote that Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, said to some youngster who was talking nonsense:

The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is so we might listen more and talk less.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.1.23

In conversation, make it a rule to hold your fire. Be the person who listens most of the time, and says only what improves the conversation. People will benefit even if they don't say so. And you'll not only improve your empathic listening skills, but more generally your conversation and observation skills, and you'll become one of those rare and valuable listeners.

As Zeno famously said,

Better to trip with the feet than with the tongue.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.1.26