

d) Active listener techniques

There are five key active listening techniques. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they say. This is important when you are running a support group so that everyone feels heard.

1. Pay attention

- give the member your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also “speaks” loudly
- look at the speaker directly.
- put aside distracting thoughts
- don’t mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations
- “listen” to the member’s body language.

2. Show that you’re listening

- use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention
- nod occasionally
- smile and use other facial expressions
- note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting
- encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes.

3. Provide feedback

- our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions
- reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. “What I’m hearing is,” and “Sounds like you are saying,” are great ways to reflect back
- ask questions to clarify certain points. “What do you mean when you say.” “Is this what you mean?”
- summarize the members’ comments periodically.

4. Defer judgment

- interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the members and limits full understanding of the message
- allow the members to finish each point before asking questions
- don’t interrupt with counter arguments.

5. Respond appropriately

- active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the member or otherwise putting him or her down
- be candid, open, and honest in your response
- assert your opinions respectfully
- treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated.

Key points

It takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener. Old habits are hard to break, and if your listening skills are as bad as many people's are, then there's a lot of habit-breaking to do!

Be deliberate with your listening and remind yourself frequently that your goal is to truly hear what the other person is saying. Set aside all other thoughts and behaviours and concentrate on the message.

Ask questions, reflect, and paraphrase to ensure you understand the message. If you don't, then you'll find that what someone says to you and what you hear can be amazingly different!

Try using active listening techniques to become a better communicator when facilitating your support group, this will help to keep members of the group engaged and feel heard.