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## Not Listening

Listen, from the Old English *hlysnan* ‘pay attention to,’ means literally to give ones attention to a sound. You can *listen to*. And you can *listen in* if you want to know what’s going on.

Conversation requires two things: talking (duh!) and listening. Listening? How can you listen *and* get ready for what you’re going to say next both at the same time? Whether you realize it or not, you and everybody does exactly that. It only gets to be a problem when you think so hard about what to say next that you don’t hear a thing the other person’s saying.

In many ways, conversation is like learning to walk one step at a time. Except in conversation, you’re taking one thought at a time. When you’re talking with someone, clear your mind of other thoughts and concentrate hard on what they’re saying. Make eye contact, nodding your head, and saying, “I see” or “Um-huh” every once in a while to show you’re listening. And practice empathetic listening by saying, “Let me see if I understand your point,” then re-word and play back what you heard and see if they agree. The give-and-take of a good conversation will just happen if you practice these techniques.

It always pays to be thoughtful during conversation, too. For example, think about the topic being discussed. Is it of interest to everyone involved? If a nuclear engineer really thought about it, would she wax on-and-on about reactor core physics to a Wall Street stockbroker? Or would a stay-at-home dad talk endlessly about the pros and cons of after-school childcare to someone who’s never had children? Always consider the other person’s interests in whatever topic you put on the table for discussion.

Lastly, a comment about interrupting: there’s a very fine line between interrupting to confirm a point and interrupting because you just can’t wait to put in your two cents. The only time it’s okay to interrupt in the middle of a sentence is when you need to say something that honestly can’t wait. Even then, begin with “I’m sorry to interrupt” or some similar apology.

A good conversationalist knows that what they say and how they say it makes the difference between giving comfort or being offensive, being clear or causing confusion, and showing others they're a friendly, thoughtful person—or a small-minded, long-winded boor.

#### Not Listening Dos and Don'ts

- Listen first.
- Think next.
- Talk last.

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