

# Are you really listening?

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When your partner is talking, does your mind have its own commentary of judgments going on? *“That’s ridiculous” “You are overreacting.”* Are you planning your next rebuttle? *“I didn’t mean it like that.” “But you asked me to give you space.”* It’s amazing to watch couples reconnect just by practicing more intentional listening.

First, going back to grade school rules can help your marriage. **Eyes on and body turned toward the speaker, nothing in your hands, body still.** This can be challenging in itself. Some people think they can be more attentive when they are moving, however, this is often interpreted as being bored, impatient, or not interested.

**Ignore background noise.** We are in the habit of checking the phone as soon as we receive a text, or looking at someone walking by. When you give your full attention to your partner, they often feel more important to you and that helps soothe the current issue. Is it absolutely essential to check the clock, or see who just emailed? At what cost?

**Know your own automatic negative thoughts** that can make the situation seem like a bigger issue. Are you making a mountain out of a molehill? Only hearing the negative instead of the compliments that came along with it? Are you assuming that the person is blaming you rather than stating how they feel?

**Check out your perceptions.** Paraphrase to show you get it. *“So you are saying that when I cook a meal that you have said before that you don’t like, then you think I don’t respect you. Is that what you are saying?”* Be careful not to add in your own defense. *“So what you are saying is that even though I only had 20 minutes to plan the meal, you expect me to remember everything you like and don’t like?”* That statement is likely to escalate rather than diffuse the situation. You don’t have to agree with what the other person is saying. **Acknowledging what they’ve said** is a great start to keeping the dialogue moving forward. Having a neutral third party present can help you get clear about your perceptions. As relationship troubles escalate, it can be harder to stay emotionally connected and find solutions.

**Ask questions to understand the story behind the complaint.** *“What does that mean to you?” “What would you like from me?”* We practice this in couples therapy to help you bypass the triggers, and get to the real issues.

Just giving your full attention to your partner can help resolve marital conflict before you even begin to talk about solutions. That’s because so many of the presenting issues are really about emotional needs not being met. Are you there for me? Can I count on you? Do I matter to you? For more, see *It’s not just the socks on the floor...the story behind the story.*