

Reflective Listening: Quick Guide

Reflective listening is a communication skill that can have tremendous positive impacts on your relationship. Below you'll find a quick guide to this powerful technique. This technique is wonderful for couples and romantic partners, it can also be effective with friends, family, colleagues, etc.; for simplicity, I'll just use "partner" here.

If you'd like to take a deeper dive, check out the blog at kindredcounselingcenter.com.



What is Reflective Listening?

Reflective listening is a communication exercise where you practice taking the time to reflect, or mirror, your partner's words and experience back to them before sharing your own. Many of us are guilty of listening to respond, rehearsing our response in our head before the other person finishes speaking. Reflective listening is like active listening 2.0 where we are actively working to understand the emotion under our partner's words and empathizing with them.



Benefits of Reflective Listening

- **Reduce escalation of conflict**—slow down, be present, create connection instead of conflict
- **Quiet mental noise**—interrupt mindreading, projection, and negative assumptions by focusing on your partner's experience
- **Reduce misunderstandings**—has built-in opportunities to make sure we're understanding our partner, nipping misunderstandings in the bud
- **Get a do-over**—have the chance to soften or clarify our words in the moment to reduce hurt feelings
- **Increase empathy**—connecting with your partner's experience builds empathy and connection
- **Diffuse reactivity**—slowing down and really hearing the person you love talk about their hurt has a way of taking the heat right out of us
- **Build intimacy & trust**—vulnerability in a safe, structured space creates intimacy and trust



Basic Communication Skills: Reflective Listening Ground Rules

- Use I-statements, not you-statements
- Keep it short
- Avoid absolutes (e.g., always, never)
- Skip the blame-game
- Be present
- Don't interrupt
- Limit ad-libbing



Instructions: Speaker & Listener

Steps

Notes/What I Noticed

- Speaker shares their experience
- Listener reflects & checks-in with "Did I miss anything? Do you want to add anything?"
- Speaker thanks the listener, corrects misunderstandings, or adds more
- Listener responds
- Speaker shares their experience
- Original speaker now becomes listener
- Repeat these steps until both partners feel heard or need to call a time-out



Variations

- Becoming** (Longhand Version)—reflect back as your partner starting with "As [insert partner's name] I..."
- What I'm Hearing You Say** (Shorthand Version)—start the reflection with something like "What I'm hearing you say..."
- You Make Sense to Me** (Advanced Version)—add in a validating statement such as "Knowing what I know of you, this makes sense to me" adding details if you're confident you know your partner feels this way



Let's Practice

- Favorite Memory**—start with reflecting one of your favorite memories with each other
 - Becoming** (longhand)—"As [insert partner's name] I..."
 - What I'm Hearing You Say** (shorthand)—"What I'm hearing you say..."
 - Check-In**—"Did I miss anything? Do you want to add anything?"
 - You Make Sense to Me** (advanced)—"Knowing what I know about you, it makes sense that..."
- Challenge**—repeat the same steps as above using a challenging topic, only a 5/10 difficulty level
- Keep Practicing!**—practice makes progress, keep at it



Troubleshooting

- **"It's too slow"**—it is slow at first, but it's faster (and more enjoyable) than working through a painful argument
- **"It's too mechanical"**—the goal isn't to parrot your partner's words, we're trying to connect with their felt experience
- **"I get distracted"**—try to really focus on your partner's words and felt experience, ask them to bite-size their sharing to help you stay present
- **"It's too awkward"**—anything new is bound to feel awkward at first, It's ok! Let yourselves be silly together and push past the awkwardness.
- **"Help. We're stuck."**—it's ok to reach out for help if you get stuck. A couples therapist can help you and your partner work through this together.



A Gentle Reminder

These skills take practice. They might not work instantly, and that's okay. Every small step you take toward bringing this practice into your relationship matters. The more you practice, the easier it becomes

If your emotions still feel unmanageable, reach out for help—you don't have to figure this out alone. In the U.S., call [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](tel:988). Outside the U.S., visit findahelpline.com