

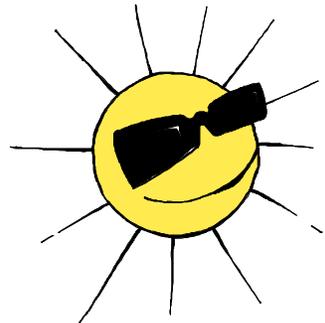
Become an even better listener.

Everybody knows that to be a good communicator you have to be a good listener.

Think about the person in your life who listens to you best. Who is it? If you analyze how they listen, what would you say? Perhaps you might say they seem comfortable and happy to listen to you and they make you feel comfortable saying almost anything. They don't jump on your case. They have a knack for knowing when to talk and when to listen, what to ask, and what to say. They seem to know what you're going to say next sometimes, so they help you out. They remind you where you were if you get off track. They laugh when you're funny. They give you feedback that they know what you mean; they can relate. A listener like

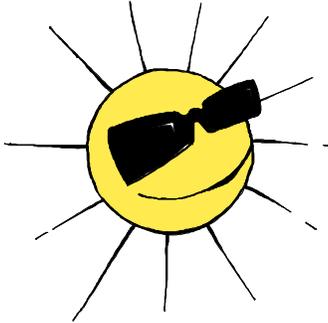
this is worth their weight in gold, aren't they?

Now read through that paragraph again. Does this describe you as a listener in WIC clinic? Let's take a closer look at the art of listening and see if you can become an even better listener than you already are.



Are you truly "there?" "Being there" means to be present, really present, as a genuine, authentic person, one-on-one with the participant. People have a very well developed antenna for who is really there and who is not, as well as for who is really listening and who is not. You can't fake truly being there. If people sense that you are really there and that you really care, they will easily believe that you are really listening. If you are just going through the motions

of your job, however, they will suspect that you are not really listening.



- **Do you look at people when they are speaking?** One of the things that tells people you are "really there" is your eyes. For instance, it helps to look at someone when they are talking, even though you may want to look through the record or enter data on the computer at the same time. *You* know you can do three things at a time, but the participant will feel you are not really listening unless you *look* like you're listening. The best way to do that, of course, is to look

directly at someone while they are talking. It also helps to be calm, not restless or fidgety.

- **Do you use "encouragers" often enough?** "Encouragers" are the little interjections of "yes, yes" and "uh-huh" and "I know what you're saying . . ." that encourage people to continue. While you are making these subtle sounds of encouragement, you will probably also nod your head, lean toward the other person, or make other facial expressions that indicate that you are interested in and understand what someone is saying.

The process of good listening involves learning to harness one's attention so that one is able to concentrate totally on the speaker's message, both verbal and nonverbal. Development of these skills is not difficult, but it does require a conscious effort.

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Paraphrasing often provides real insight. Just hearing the same comments in another person's words can help someone to see new possibilities and to provoke new insight.

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Communication and Education Skills

- **Do you notice when a person leaves a thought unfinished?** Sometimes people become self-conscious or they aren't sure how much to tell you, so they hesitate or stop talking, leaving you with unanswered questions. Although there's nothing wrong with silence when someone is thinking, the exceptional listener notices awkward gaps and helps with a word or asks an appropriate question so that the participant fills out the picture. Participants often need encouragement to express themselves verbally. They may not be used to having someone really listen to them! They may not be comfortable being in the spotlight as they are in your session. They will appreciate your encouragement if they feel stalled for some reason--plus they will know that you are really listening.

- **Do you check and make sure you've got the facts right?** Just say, "Let me make sure I've got this right. You breastfeed him once before you take him to day-care, and then . . ." This is called "paraphrasing." It *proves* to the participant that

you have been listening! The chances that they will trust your advice or cooperate with you on problem-solving will go up fast if you prove you are listening closely.

- **Do you avoid giving negative feedback while the participant is talking--even if you are shocked?** Fussing at people is not an effective way to help them change their behavior and having a strong negative reaction to something they are telling you they do is not effective either. A negative reaction cuts off communication. Even if you disapprove of something, wait until it's your turn. Then think through your approach. Be sensitive to how the person might react. Your goal is not to make them feel badly about what they're doing, but to help them learn a new way or compelling reasons to do something differently. This is the art of counseling.

- **Do you listen for clues throughout your session?** Participants often drop clues or ask questions about their worries or concerns when

something jogs their memory, like when the child is being weighed and measured or when you are going over a food questionnaire. They also give you clues with their voices or their bodies as to what they are most interested in. Listen for clues. Develop a sixth sense about them. These clues can guide your whole session.

- **Do you separate "gathering information" from "exploring for solutions?"** Listen first and educate later. There is sometimes the temptation, especially for an inexperienced nutrition educator, to mix information gathering with education by jumping in too early with advice or ideas. It works best to gather all the information you need first. Then move on to nutrition education. This

way you have a chance to really prioritize the main concerns of the participant and/or your main concerns. It gets too confusing if you alternately gather information and counsel, then gather more information on something else and counsel again.

Listening might seem like it's the easiest part of your job, but there is more to it than it seems. Listening skills are worth developing. Concentrating on listening and thinking about what the speaker is saying (or perhaps not saying) will enrich your sessions. Also, integrating ways to show the participant you are really listening can make your efforts in nutrition education more effective. Sometimes it's the simplest things that make a big difference in communication. Let's take advantage of this so that we can make more of a difference in peoples' lives without working any harder!

Someone who is serious about increasing communication competence needs to swallow hard and stretch, forcing themselves to attempt the new behavior. The time to begin is now!

B. Holli and R. Calabrese
Communication and Education Skills

Activities to do before Discussion

Become an even better listener

1. **What are your strengths as a listener and in what ways could you improve as a listener?** To help you assess that, here is a list of the attributes of a good listener that were just discussed in the module.
 - I am usually truly "there" in a session, present and interested.
 - I clearly demonstrate to people that I am listening to what they say.
 - I usually look directly at people when they are speaking (even when I have paperwork to do).
 - I use "encouragers" often.
 - I am comfortable with a little silence when people are thinking.
 - I try to help people out if they are having trouble expressing themselves.
 - I stay calm, even when a participant tells me something I feel they should not be doing.
 - I am able to pick up little clues about the participant's concerns throughout the session.
 - I keep "gathering information" before I start providing education and helping the client with a goal.
2. **Which 2 things above did you score yourself lowest on?** These would be good skills for you to develop. Write them on an index card and put them over your desk or in your counseling area. For one week, try to focus on practicing these new skills in clinic. At the end of each clinic, assess yourself again on a scale of 1 to 10 on how well you are doing these 2 skills. See if your "scores" go up. See if you are becoming more and more comfortable at doing these things. What is the reaction of your participants? Do you notice any subtle differences? Bring your Activity Worksheet with you to the discussion group.

The listener needs to provide feedback to the speaker that the message has been heard and understood.

3. **We do that with "encouragers" and body language, like nods and smiles, and we also do it by "paraphrasing."** Paraphrasing is another word for putting the participant's thoughts or feelings in your own words. The module talked about saying, "Let me make sure I've got this right . . . You breastfeed him once before you take him to daycare, and then . . ." That kind of paraphrasing covers the facts. You can also reflect feelings back to the participant, like, "What I'm hearing is that you have a lot of frustration about . . ." Paraphrasing can also show that you understand what a parent is dealing with, like "It sounds like you really have your hands full, especially with a child who . . ."

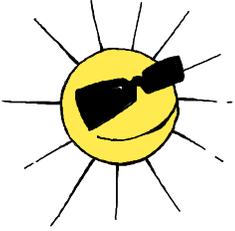
Do you paraphrase in your nutrition education sessions? For one week try to paraphrase once with each participant you talk with. It could be awkward at first. You might want to quit, because it is so different. Hang in there for a full week, though, and see if you can get used to it. It's a skill that takes getting used to, but once you start doing it regularly, you will notice a change in your session. People really want to be listened to. If you are a highly skilled listener who is able to paraphrase, you will find that people listen much more closely to what *you* have to say. It's a two-way street. People are hungry to be heard and understood. Paraphrasing can help you communicate that you are a person who is capable of doing that for them.

Thinking about and doing these activities will prepare you for the discussion group. Complete the Activity Worksheet as you practice these activities.

Activity Worksheet
Bright Ideas - Unit 12

Name _____

Date _____



Become an even better listener

1. Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 on each of these attributes:

I am usually truly "there," present and interested in a session. _____

I clearly demonstrate to people that I am listening to what they say. _____

I usually look directly at people when they are speaking (even when I have paperwork to do). _____

I use "encouragers" often. _____

I am comfortable with a little silence when people are thinking. _____

I try to help people out if they are having trouble expressing themselves. _____

I stay calm, even when a participant tells me something I feel they should not be doing. _____

I am able to pick up little clues about the participant's concerns throughout the session. _____

I keep listening and "gathering information" before I start providing education and helping the client with a goal. _____

2. List 2 of the above skills you tried to focus on this past month--describe how you are using these skills. Describe reactions you have noticed from your clients.

3. List 3 examples of paraphrasing you have used this past month when seeing WIC clients or when talking with WIC staff:

a.

b.

c.

- 4. List the order of activities you do when certifying a new client.** When are you listening and "gathering information" and when are you providing education and "exploring for solutions?" Describe how you have or may want to change the order to allow yourself the chance to collect all the information before you start to give information. Example: Greet client, Nutrition Questionnaire, Computer Screens, Ht/Wt/HCT, etc.

The Art of Listening

Discuss these ideas with your supervisor or in a staff discussion group. These Activity Worksheets and a discussion are to be done for completion of the module.