

Why Are Some People Bad at Listening?

Most of us have had the experience of being with a bad listener. There's the person who looks at his phone while you speak and periodically nods his head and mutters "Mmm Hmm." There's the one who stares blankly at you with a mix of boredom and resentment, just praying that you will soon stop talking. It's often very hurtful.

I suspect that it is so hurtful because it strikes so closely to what has traditionally been thought of as a primary goal of human beings: communion. Conversation is one of the primary ways in which human beings both establish and further communion with one another. When people fail to listen, communion is thwarted.

So why do people fail to listen to us? Why do we fail to listen to others?

One root cause is probably egotism and pride. Self-absorption and solely focusing on one's own life diminishes our concern for others and erodes our ability to listen to them. Pride can lead us to assume that we have nothing important to learn from another person, nothing worthwhile to hear from him or her.

I think another reason someone can be bad at listening is a lack of appreciation for receptivity and silence. There's a persistent temptation in human life to associate speaking with activity and listening with inactivity; to associate clamor with meaning and silence with a void. I have to believe this temptation is even more prevalent in modern life where we have ample opportunity to constantly surround ourselves with noise and distractions. A person's lack of comfort with receptivity and silence will often manifest itself in the form of poor listening skills.

On the other hand, however, I think some people labeled as bad listeners have a valid recognition of the superficiality of so much that passes for conversation. Sometimes small talk is an initial avenue for deeper dialogue, but too many people never venture beyond small talk in their interactions. Though I don't advocate being rude, it's understandable that some people will lose patience in the latter situations.

These are just some of my initial thoughts. I'd be curious to hear yours. To further stoke the fires of conversation, I'll leave you with these five quotes on the importance of listening and silence:

"When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen."

~ Ernest Hemingway

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply."

~ Stephen Covey

"I've begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own."

~ Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*

"It takes a great man to be a good listener."

~ Calvin Coolidge

"We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more and speak less."

~ Diogenes Laertius