

## Effective Listening Skills

It has been said that we ought to listen twice as long as we talk. At first, listening seems easy. It is only when we really tune in that we find out that effective listening requires considerable attention and some finesse.

- *Listen to understand.* Focus on what the other person is saying rather than trying to formulate a response or question.
- *Listen objectively, suspend judgment.* Each time you listen, try to hear the speaker as if it were the first time.
- *Listen for the emotion behind the words.* This is the time to call on your emotional vocabulary skills. Reflect back what you have heard. A phrase like, “That must have been disappointing,” builds empathy.
- *Listen for underlying concerns.* Listen for the deeper concerns that are driving a particular point of view, position, or set of issues. For example, concern for the safety of loved ones and for their well-being is often a driving underlying concern.
- *Gently challenge assumptions or prejudice expressed by any members.* For example, if a white member says, “Homophobia is terrible in the Black Church” that is a generalization that needs to be addressed. If an African-American person is attending, this could feel like a personal attack on their church, and might not make them feel welcome.
- *Try to forget yourself.* Now is the time to place yourself in the shoes of the other person. Keep listening, even if you disagree with their opinion. Many of us have learned and changed in PFLAG, but everyone has to do this in his or her own time. Focus on the person speaking.
- *Be aware of your body language.* Encourage the speaker with a smile and a nod. Lean forward.
- *Be genuine.* Allow your true self to come through. Don’t be superficial. The more honest and open you are, the more effective you will be.
- *Don’t interrupt.* Interruptions should only be permitted when they are a request for clarification.
- *Ask questions.* Questions should be open-ended and not overused. They should be genuine questions — not a leading statement or opinion framed as a question.



- *Acknowledge what you hear.* Sometimes it is helpful to repeat back what you think you heard.
- *Ask permission before giving advice.* People like to be helpful. If we have struggled with the same issues, we feel compelled to offer advice. If the other person says, “What do you think?” that is your cue. Sometimes you might say, “I have an idea, do you want to hear it?” Sharing your own similar experience without implying your resolution is the best or only way to handle such an experience may be helpful, but remember to keep your focus on the person seeking support.

