



Blocks to Listening

Listening/Hearing, micro-skill #5 of the Empathy Decathlon® is how we transition from me-empathy to we-empathy. How we listen to others and to the situations around us matters. It also matters that we accept that life is a bit messy, that we are evolving humans, and oftentimes we have blocks to how we listen. By recognizing and removing some of the listening blocks listed below (from the *Messages: The Communication Skills* book by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, Patrick Fanning), you will actively become a more curious, open, and ever evolving listener!

1. Rehearsing

You can't really listen because you're practicing what you're going to say next. You may look like you're listening, but your mind is going a mile a minute because you have a story to tell or a point to make.

2. Mind Reading

Rather than paying attention to what another person is actually saying, you're trying to figure out what he or she is really thinking or feeling. Mind readers make assumptions about what people mean or how people react to them, usually based on people's body language and other nonverbal cues.

3. Comparing

You have a hard time listening because you're trying to see who is smarter, more caring, more competent - you or the person speaking. You can't let in much because you're trying to see if you measure up.

4. Filtering

You listen to some things and not to others. You pay attention enough to hear only what you feel you need to hear, then your mind wanders. Or you filter to avoid hearing things that are negative, critical, or unpleasant. It's as if some words were never said.

5. Judging

You dismiss others based on who they are or what they say. You aren't really listening but having a knee-jerk reaction.



6. Dreaming

You are half listening, and suddenly the person's words trigger a chain of private thoughts. Your mind wanders, and you no longer hear what the person is saying. You can be prone to dreaming when you feel bored or anxious.

7. Identifying

A person's words remind you of something in your own experience, so now you're not listening to his or her words, you're thinking about what happened to you. Often you're just waiting for the person to finish so you can tell your own story.

8. Advising

Before people get to what's really troubling them, you jump in with suggestions to solve the problem. Before they are finished talking, you are thinking about what to do.

9. Sparring

You are quick to disagree - often listening only for points to argue with. This tends to happen when you have strong opinions on a subject. One type of sparring is the put-down, using sarcastic remarks to trivialize or dismiss another person's point of view. Another is discounting - running yourself down when you receive a compliment.

10. Placating

You are nice, pleasant, and supportive but are not really listening. You will generally agree with what is being said, without really taking it in. In this mode, you may also be patronizing. This block is often used with children and older people.

Practice work!

- What are your most common listening blocks?
- What will help you be aware that you are using these blocks?
- What strategies might you use to return to actively listening when you recognize that you listening is blocked, but you REALLY want to listen?