

ACTIVE LISTENING

Introduction

Imagine being asked how work went at the end of the day. You start to describe what happened, but as you do, you notice one listener looking at her phone. Another interrupts, to make a joke about something you mention. Then the first listener eventually puts her phone away and, as you pause for breath, begins an anecdote about her job. Would you keep trying to tell them about it?

Now imagine a better audience. Listeners nod attentively and offer encouragement to keep going. When you pause for breath, no one interrupts. When you stop, someone asks a question which shows they've been listening, and invites you to say more. You keep going until you've shared what's on your mind. As you finish, you feel better: your listeners care, and understand.

A person speaking is constantly monitoring their listeners' reactions. If we want prisoners to share their hopes, feelings and worries honestly, we need to show that we're listening, we're interested, and we want the prisoner to keep talking. We're not listening to prove a point or show we're clever – we're listening to understand, and to bring out the best in them. This is active listening.

Active listening means taking practical steps to encourage prisoners to speak, and to attend to what they say. It's the opposite of half listening – while waiting for our chance to speak. When we listen actively, we try to clear our minds of the desire to interrupt, chip in or argue. It means:

- Using attentive body language: nodding and making eye contact.
- Letting the speaker speak: neither interrupting nor storing up points to make.
- Reflecting back what we hear, by repeating key points.

Active listening encourages prisoners to share their thoughts: it makes for better conversations and greater understanding.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. Listen actively:** This can be the hardest thing about active listening, but it's crucial. We need to consciously decide that we're listening – not talking. This means letting go of, or suppressing, the many things we could say. Perhaps we disagree, perhaps we know better, perhaps we have experienced something very similar. If we are to listen actively

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however, we aren't going to comment on any of these things right now. Instead, we relax and let them go.

- B. **Show you're listening:** Do this through maintaining eye contact or nod along, say "yes" or "mmm" to show you are listening. When we stop trying to chip in, our body is likely to relax. But we also want to show we're listening. Perhaps we'll nod as the speaker talks or interject with "mmm" or "right." We can maintain eye contact. We might also take on a relaxed posture – while maintaining an appropriate distance and stance for personal protection.
- C. **Encourage the prisoner to keep talking:** You can do this by staying silent and when needed, ask open and clarifying questions. People usually use pauses to chip in or change the subject. With active listening however, a pause is the fragile moment in which we offer support to help the prisoner keep talking. So, rather than interrupting, we might remain attentively silent, waiting for what's coming next. Or we could ask a clarifying question – "So what happened next?" Ask open questions to help the prisoner talk further. Generally, we prefer not to interrupt. But where we do want to encourage the prisoner to talk further, an open question may be a better way to invite them to speak at length or to go deeper into their feelings. For example, if we see a prisoner is upset, asking, "Are you OK?" doesn't get us very far. "How did the visit go?" or "What's on your mind?" may be better ways to get the prisoner talking.
- D. **Report back what you are hearing:** Show you are truly listening and are engaged with the prisoner's circumstances by repeating their words back to them. When the prisoner stops, or looks to us for a response, we can show that we've truly been listening, and that we are seeking to understand them, by reflecting back what we've heard. We might say something like "What I'm hearing is that you're really disappointed about what's happening." Or "Can I check what you're telling me, it sounds like you're really excited about this." If we hear something promising, we might switch from Active listening to supporting the prisoner to plan change, by emphasising something positive they've said.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Losing track of what is happening around you:** Ideally, active listening demands that we attend fully to the speaker. But no matter how intense the conversation, we need to keep scanning the landing and wing and attending to everything else that's going on (see radar be seen looking: technique 1). We also need to consider personal safety, our positioning and the positioning of prisoners around us. Finally, we need to think about maintaining appropriate boundaries – and perceptions of appropriate boundaries – in

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terms of how long we spend with individual prisoners and where we talk to them.

- **Not challenging appropriately:** Understanding the prisoner's perspective is important, but that doesn't mean validating abhorrent, illegal or unethical suggestions. For example, if a prisoner makes a racist statement, or describes planning to take revenge after their release, we can listen and understand what they're saying – then challenge their sentiments and the rationale behind them.

Case Study

Officer Chambers is having a keyworker session with a prisoner called Andy. They decide to utilise the active listening technique during their keywork session with Andy to try to get him to open up more and help to build their professional relationship with him. They approach the Andy to have their keywork session:

- PO: Hi Andy. I've come for your keywork session. Do you want to come through this way?
- Andy: Fine gov. (Moves to a more private room to conduct the session).
- PO: Ok cool. So, tell me about your week so far?
- Andy: Yeah, it's been fine gov. Nothing to worry about to be honest.
- PO: Right...
- Andy: Actually, gov one thing that has pissed me off this week is that there are a couple of new lads on the wing and they play their music so loud and all night. They are so fucking annoying. I have complained but nothing gets done.
- PO: Oh my god. That would be a nightmare for me too. I am such a light sleeper. Well, that is awful. I will see what I can do ok.
- Andy: Thanks gov. Yeah it is always the black prisoners that are so loud and ignorant.
- PO: Well don't worry I will get it all sorted. Anything else you want to mention while I am here?
- Andy: Nah, just that.

This is a **non-example** for a few reasons. Firstly, the officer fails to let go of the urge to speak and talks about their own personal experiences with regards to sleeping. Secondly, the officer doesn't challenge the prisoner when they make a racist remark about black prisoners. Active listening doesn't mean that we can't still challenge prisoners. It is important to challenge unacceptable thinking regardless of the context in which it is said.

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An example in this instance would require the officer to remove their urge to speak and not to chime in with their own experiences. They would really focus in on what the prisoner is saying and think about how they could get them to open up more. Secondly, the officer would also firmly challenge Andy's racist thinking that "black prisoners are always loud". They could use **the code switch technique (technique 6)** in this context. Since that the comment that was made by Andy was one of a racist nature then it is important that this is documented according to local procedures.

Mitigations to using this technique

Consider the following questions to think about the circumstances when you would and wouldn't choose to use this technique:

- Would you modify any of the steps for the active listening depending on which prisoner you are speaking to?
- Which situations would it be inappropriate to use the active listening technique?

Final Reflection Questions

Answer these final questions to help to consolidate your learning and consider how you will use this technique in your day-to-day practice in your current working context.

- What is the goal? What are prison officers looking to achieve by using this technique?
- Why should this technique work? How should prisoners behave differently?
- What do you need to do? Outline the key success checks you need to meet to apply this technique?
- What are the pitfalls? When shouldn't we use this technique? What barriers do you foresee to using this technique? How could you overcome them?