

## **BEING HEARD** (from [Susan Heitler, Ph.D.](#), a Denver clinical psychologist)

***(I like this article because Susan Heitler touches on many of the underlying reasons our communication is not effective. Such good information! - - - Diane)***

Nothing erodes a sense of personal empowerment like not being heard. What may be going on when you try to offer a perspective and it's ignored, brushed aside, or automatically negated? Feeling consistently unheard suggests that work troubles or marriage problems could be on the road ahead--or have already arrived.

Initially, dismissal of your viewpoint is likely to evoke a bit of anxiety. If it continues, being ignored or negated probably will engender irritation and eventually even anger. Consistently being ignored by someone of import to you also can invite depression. Depression is a disorder of power. If what you say is not being taken seriously, you will feel dis-empowered.

So what could be going on when listening blockages occur?

### **1. They don't listen to me because of confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance.**

Most people open their ears to information that confirms what they already believe, and close them to dis-confirmatory information. If I already believe, for instance, that religious affiliations augment life, I will be open to research that suggests the benefits of prayers. If my belief is that religion is the opiate of the masses, I will be highly skeptical of positive reports about the impacts of prayer.

Because of confirmation bias, people tend to listen to those who express opinions are similar to theirs. People with left-wing political assumptions, for instance, tune in to MSNBC for information that supports their prior beliefs. People with right-wing political assumptions watch Fox News. Neither will tend to listen to the other group's newscasters. And if they do, they will be more likely to disparage it than to take it seriously.

Cognitive dissonance plays a role, too. If you like someone, you are likely to be interested in hearing their perspectives. If you are angry at someone, your knee-jerk reaction is to reject what they say. We take in information if the data, or the giver, feels consonant with how we feel either about the issue or the speaker.

Both confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance make us prone to reject dissonant data, that is, data that differs from what we previously have believed or that is spoken by someone toward whom we harbor negative feelings. If negative political talk has convinced us we should not like a particular politician, for instance, we are unlikely to listen seriously to his ideas.

### **2. They don't listen to me because of narcissism.**

The essence of a narcissistic way of being in the world is a stance of "I know best" so "Your perspective is not worth listening to." This all-about-me and I'm-always-right stance leads them to do lots of talking with quite minimal listening. When they do listen, it is to dismiss or show what's wrong with what others say instead of to take in new information.

Teenagers tend to specialize in narcissistic stances. They often believe that they know best. Listening to Mom or Dad can easily feel to them like an action that would compromise their integrity as emerging independent individuals.

In any case, there's good news here. Whatever is causing habitual *but* responses, a *butting* listener who has become aware of the habit may be willing to learn to respond instead with *Yes...And at the same time*.

### **3. They don't listen to me because of anger.**

Anger opens the mouth and closes the ears. Intense anger especially diminishes listening capacity. The more anger, the more inability to uptake new information.

Ever try talking with someone who is raging? You might as well talk to a statue in terms of how much what you say will be heard. As with narcissistic listening, if someone who is mad does "hear" you, it will be just to knock away what you have said with reasons why what you said is wrong. Expect what you say to be met with "But..." Anger creates narcissistic functioning, i.e., "What I believe and want is holy, and what you believe and want is irrelevant."

### **4. Distrust blocks information uptake.**

Once you have said or done something mean, hurtful or dishonest to someone, that person is likely to remain wary of whether you are for or against them. Once shattered, trust is slow to heal.

### **5. They don't listen to me because of how I treat myself.**

How well do you listen to your own quiet voices? When something within you speaks, e.g., says, "I'm tired," do you listen, or do you ignore that inner voice?

Listeners subjectively tend to mirror speakers' attitudes toward themselves. If you like yourself, others will tend to like you. If you listen to yourself, others are more likely to listen to you. If you "but" yourself ("*But* I have too much to do to go to sleep now"), others are likely subconsciously to do the same toward you.

### **6. They don't listen to me because of my aggressive manner.**

Everything we say comes with a perceptible tag that says either "You're OK" or "You're not OK." If you say "It's a beautiful day," your tone of voice will convey either good cheer ("I'm OK, you're OK") or annoyance ("I'm OK, you're not OK"). For instance if you are frustrated that your friend is still at home when you wanted to go out together to do

errands, "It's a beautiful day," may convey, "What the devil is wrong with you, staying home in this weather!"

Any even slight tone of irritation, complaint, or criticism is likely to evoke defensive responses.

If your messages are not going through, check out your voice tones and attitude. Hostile voice tones invite others to defend against instead of listening to what you are saying.

**7. They don't listen to me because of my quiet or loud voice; because I talk too fast or too slowly; because of the uptick voice at the end of my sentences; because I string together too much data with excessive *ands*.**

Listening effectively occurs only within a relatively narrow bandwidth. If a speaker's voice is too loud, or too soft, or the words come out either too fast or too slowly, listeners turn away.

Pay attention too to the common mistake of ending each statement as if it were a question, that is, with a melody that goes up (signaling question mark) instead of down (signaling a period). "This room is too hot?" is less likely to lead a listener to turn on an air conditioner than "This room is too hot."

Similarly, beware of linking multiple thoughts with "and." "I went to the store *and* saw Jack there *and* realized that I had left the oven on *and* so I ran out without even saying good bye *and* I've been wondering ever since if I hurt his feelings *and* now I would like to..." No matter how interesting your comments are, run-on sentences are a listening turn-off.

Parents of teenagers are especially at risk, with or without too many *ands*, for offering more information than their son or daughter will be willing to listen to. Specializing in the 3-sentence rule (no more than three sentences per comment to a teenager) can increase the odds that a teenager will keep their ears open when parents are talking.

**8. They don't listen to me because of I've been giving advice instead of information.**

It's normal for family members, work colleagues, and even a boss, to tell their troubles to others. Does that mean that they want advice? Unlikely. Information, yes; advice, no. What's the difference?

***Information* empowers others to make their own decisions.**

"Planting flowers before June in Colorado often results in lots of frozen, never-to-grow-again plants."

***Advice*, by contrast, risks undermining others' sense of personal empowerment, especially when it is given with insistence that "You should do it my way."**

"Wait to plan your flowers until after June 1st. You'd be making a huge mistake if you don't follow that rule."

**9. They don't listen to me because of I use annoyingly repetitive words: *Like, you know ...***

Repeated non-meaningful words clogs a conversation. "I went into town *you know* yesterday. *Like*, it was so hot out I thought I'd *like* melt in the bus."

Because teenagers learn language habits from peers as well as from home, they are especially at risk for picking up this habit, a habit that decreases parents' interest in listening.

**10. Others don't listen to me because they treat me the way I treat them.**

"Before you criticize me, better look at yourself." Those words from a famous song offer perennially helpful advice. Maybe the person you want to have hear you better has been getting short-changed on the listening end from you. Are you too often dismissive, minimizing the import of what others tell you, or listening to show them what's wrong with what they've said instead of listening for what's interesting?

If you have not been listening to them, the odds zoom downward that they will hear you. The good news here is that pretty much everyone else wants to be heard just like you do.

To assess your own listening skills, you might try the quiz in an earlier post I've written [on listening patterns](#).

**So if someone who is important in your life continues not to listen...**

Diagnosis is a first step to treatment.

Understanding what you may be contributing to the listening blockages is especially helpful. What you have been doing, you can change.

The old adage about where there's a will, there's a way has much truth in it.

As to how to get yourself heard more effectively, remember the rule of sameness: More of the same will get you more of the same. Think of the challenge of getting heard as a fun opportunity for creative thinking.

[Susan Heitler, Ph.D.](#), a Denver clinical psychologist, is author of the book and workbook [The Power of Two](#), and of the online marriage skill-building program that teaches the talking and listening skills for relationship success, [PowerOfTwoMarriage.com](#).