

The Speaker Listener Technique

Rules for Both of You

1. *The Speaker has the floor.* Use a real object to designate the floor. We're pretty concrete; we have actually given couples pieces of linoleum, so when someone says they have the "floor," they really mean it! You can use anything, though: the TV remote, a pen, a paperback book. The point is that you have to use some specific object, because if you do not have the floor, you are a Listener. As Speaker and Listener, you following the rules for each role.
2. *Share the floor.* You share the floor over the course of a conversation. The Speaker is the first one to hold the floor. After the Speaker talks, you switch roles and continue, the floor changing hands regularly. This is a trust issue: you trust that you will have the floor when you need it, so you can pass it to your partner when he or she needs it.
3. *No problem solving.* When using this technique, you are going to focus on having good discussions, not on trying to come to solutions. When you focus on solving a problem, you are far less likely to really hear what each other thinks about the problem.

Rules for the Speaker

1. *Speak for yourself. Don't mind-read.* Talk about *your* thoughts, feelings, and concerns, not your perceptions of the Listener's point of view or motives. Try to use "I" statements, and talk about your own point of view and feelings. "I was upset when you forgot our date" is an "I" statement. "I think you don't care about me" is not.
2. *Don't go on and on.* You will have plenty of opportunity to say all you need to say. To help the Listener listen actively, it's very important that you keep what you say in manageable pieces. If you are in the habit of delivering monologues, remember that having the floor protects you from interruption. You can afford to pause to be sure your partner understands you.
3. *Stop and let the Listener paraphrase.* After saying a bit, stop and allow the Listener to paraphrase what you just said. If the paraphrase was not quite accurate, you should politely and gently restate what you meant to say in a way that helps your partner understand. This is not a test! You want to make it possible for your partner to understand you as well as he or she can.

Rules of the Listener

1. *Paraphrase what you hear.* You must paraphrase what the Speaker is saying. Briefly repeat back what you heard the Speaker say, using your own words if you like, and make sure you understand what was said. When you take the time to restate what you heard, you show your partner that you are listening. If you truly don't understand some phrase or example, you may ask the Speaker to clarify, but you need to limit yourself to just asking for explanations.
2. *Don't rebut. Focus on the Speaker's message.* While in the Listener role, you may not offer your opinion or thoughts. This is the hardest part of being a good Listener. If you are upset by what your partner says, you need to edit out any response you may want to make and *pay attention* to what your partner is saying. Wait until you get the floor to make your response. You will have your chance, and when you do, you'll want your partner to extend the same courtesy to you. When you are a Listener, your job is to speak only in the service of understanding your partner. Any words or gestures to show your opinion are not allowed, including making faces!