

how to
listen
so people will
talk

Build Stronger Communication
and Deeper Connections

Becky Harling



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Becky Harling, *How to Listen So People Will Talk*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2017 by Becky Harling

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017936684

ISBN 978-0-7642-1944-3

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2011

Scripture quotations labeled NLT are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled THE MESSAGE are from THE MESSAGE. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Cover design by Greg Jackson, Thinkpen Design, Inc.

Author is represented by The Blythe Daniel Agency.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Becky Harling, *How to Listen So People Will Talk*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

This book is dedicated to my
precious daughter,

Bethany Lindgren.

Bethany, I'm so thankful that you found
the courage to honestly challenge me
to become a more attentive listener.

I love you and have the deepest respect
for how you listen to others.

Truly you model what it looks like
to listen to others like Jesus.

I love you!

Contents

1. I Dare You to Ask! 13
 2. Raise Your Self-Awareness 26
 3. Honor Another's Story 41
 4. Silence Your Inner Fixer 55
 5. Ask Great Questions 71
 6. Offer Empathy, Validate Feelings 89
 7. Watch Your Nonverbals—They're Speaking Loudly 105
 8. Seek to Understand During Conflict 120
 9. Let Go of Distractions 137
 10. Be Available 153
- Notes 167
- Acknowledgments 170
- About the Author 174

1

I Dare You to Ask!

Let the wise listen and add to their learning.

—Proverbs 1:5

I'm convinced that until we risk asking for honest feedback, we can't grow. And even though we want personal growth, it can sure feel painful, right? I was committed to personal growth. I just hadn't anticipated the pain when I asked my teen daughter one crucial question: "Do you think I listen well?"

I expected the conversation to go much differently. Honestly, I was expecting rave reviews, but that's not exactly the way the conversation went. Note to self: Don't ask your kids their opinion unless you're prepared for what they really think! But I *had* asked, and she had answered. "Well . . . (long pause). Sometimes you listen well. But you seem distracted a lot. Often you dive in with your own story or interrupt. Sometimes you give advice and I just want you to listen. I want to feel validated."

Later that night I lay in bed processing my questions internally. *What did she mean? Am I really that self-focused that I dive in*

with my own stories, taking away from hers? And then there was the whole question of advice. Aren't mothers supposed to give advice? I mean, we have so much wisdom. How do I validate if I don't agree with what she's feeling? And am I really that distracted? She was right. I did sometimes interrupt, but doesn't everybody interrupt at times? I felt pretty sure I was better than most moms. Then it dawned on me. An aha moment: *I'm being defensive! Arghhh. Help, God!*

That conversation prompted me to come to a startling realization: I have a listening problem. And I'm guessing you might as well. That's probably why you're curious about this book. It could be that someone's told you that you don't listen well. Or you've simply noticed that those closest to you aren't talking as much. They seem to confide in others rather than you.

I don't know about you, but whenever I process a difficult conversation, I pray. It helps me to talk through all my feelings with the Lord. So the moment I realized how defensive I felt, I knew I needed to pray. *Lord, this is hard. But Bethany's right, isn't she? I want to feel like I'm being a great listener, but I also want to receive truth. I long to be self-aware, not self-focused. But honestly, I love to talk! You know, God. You created me to be an extrovert. Could this be your fault? Uh-oh. Defensive again. Lord, I confess to you that I have been self-focused. Forgive me. Search my heart and uproot selfishness. I love Bethany and I want her to feel heard. Show me how to listen.*

That little prayer was the beginning of my journey to becoming a more attentive and loving listener by watching what I say when I'm talking with someone who is confiding in me. And since I'm committed to authenticity, I'll tell you honestly that I'm still growing and it's not always easy. Some days I'm a much better listener than others. Aren't we all?! But I'm improving and growing in this area because my relationships are important to me. I want people in my life to feel heard and loved, don't you? I've seen that the effort I've put into listening is paying off, and I know that's possible for you as well.

Enough About Me, Let's Talk About You!

As I've shared about me, something's probably come up in your mind that reminded you of a conversation you had where you blew it in the listening department. Maybe you realized you didn't really listen to your co-worker or neighbor the other day when they opened up about a problem they're facing. Or maybe you were spacing out while your friend was telling you about a new dream she has. Or maybe when your kids were talking to you, you were scanning Facebook posts. So let's talk about you. How are you doing in the listening realm? How would others rate you as a listener? Would you dare to ask those closest to you how well they think you listen? It's scary, I know, to invite that kind of feedback. But can you imagine how much you might grow if you were willing to take that risk? How would your spouse, friend, boss, or co-worker react if you asked that question? Powerful stuff!

Maybe you're like a lady I met a few years ago who said to me, "I can't help it. I'm only good to listen for about fifteen seconds." Really? That's just an excuse for not wanting to put in the effort. Reflect for a moment or two and ask yourself honestly:

- Do my loved ones feel safe enough to express their hearts, or are they afraid I'll dive in with unwanted and unsolicited advice?
- When I'm with a friend at lunch, do I text or check social media while she's talking?
- How would my co-workers rate me as a listener?

I'm not trying to lay a guilt trip on you. I'm just trying to encourage you to examine your listenership and be willing to grow. Because here's the deal: People feel more loved and valued if we are actively and attentively listening to them. So why don't we take listening more seriously?

We may know that listening is important, but without even being aware, we interrupt, dive in with our own stories, give unwanted

advice, or simply space out. It makes sense because we've got stimulation bombarding us all day long. We're more distracted than ever. It's become our normal. As a result, we're losing our ability to be fully present and attentive to others because we've bought in to the myth of multitasking. It's hard to listen when you know you have one minute to send an email before you leave, or dinner needs to be ready in five. I know, because I'm guilty too.

When I was raising my kids, I prided myself on the fact that I could cook dinner, help with homework, and talk on the phone all at the same time. Now I realize that's not something to be proud of. Looking back, I did a disservice to my kids and to whomever I was talking with on the phone. And dinner—well, let's just say I had a few burned failures.

My theory is that often we're not aware of our own shortcomings and weaknesses. But our relationships are important to us. That's why I want to dare you to ask honestly: "Do you think I listen well?"

You'll Need a Plan

When I realized I needed a growth plan for listening, I turned to the Bible. I learned that there are at least seventy verses in the Bible that use the word *listen* or talk about listening in some form. Wow! Apparently God wants us to hear Him on this topic! Many of those verses are found in the book of Proverbs, which was written by Solomon, who was considered the wisest man of his time. Did you know that this tiny Old Testament book is loaded with relational wisdom? Here are just a few examples:

- "Let the wise listen and add to their learning" (Proverbs 1:5).
- "Turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding" (Proverbs 2:2).
- "To answer before listening—that is folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13).

- “The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down” (Proverbs 14:1).

I wanted to be a wise woman who listened and invested in her relationships. Proverbs seemed to offer just the plan I needed. As I read and re-read this short book, I began to pull out practical principles that I could immediately put into practice. They became my plan for personal growth in the realm of listening. And you know what? As I faithfully practiced my plan, my relationships gradually began to improve.

Friend, just like I needed a plan, *you* need a plan. You won't become an effective listener without intentionality because listening doesn't come naturally. As humans, we're self-focused. But it's possible to change! It'll take practice and patience, but it's worth the effort, because how you listen not only deepens your relationships, it's also important to God.

God created us for relationship. We weren't meant to live our lives alone. We were designed to mirror the image of a relational God, One who communicates and connects with others. This is why we naturally crave love and attention from others, and they naturally crave love and attention from us. Just as God listens to us, we are designed to imitate Him and listen to others. Not only does this meet the need for love and attention in the person talking, but it meets our need to feel loved and connected as well.

American poet and writer Maya Angelou said, “The most called-upon prerequisite of a friend is an accessible ear.”¹ Do you want to cultivate deep friendships? Then learn to listen. I guarantee you'll feel happier, more connected, and more valuable. The bottom line is that people are drawn to those who will listen to them. Learning to listen will deepen your relationships, establish your credibility, and give you a reputation of being wise. Wow! What a win.

Jesus modeled what we read about relational wisdom in Proverbs. Let's look at a passage where Jesus specifically addresses listening.

Consider Carefully How You Listen

At one point Jesus wasn't sure those following Him were understanding His message, so He gave them a stern warning about their ability to listen.

Turning to His followers, Jesus instructed, "Therefore consider carefully how you listen" (Luke 8:18). We need to consider our listening skills. He calls us to look at ourselves and give some thought to how we listen to others. As His followers, we are called to love others radically. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Loving includes listening.

As I think about the different relationships I enjoy, whether my husband, my kids, my grandkids, my friends, my co-workers, or my neighbors, I want each person to feel valued and loved. Isn't that the way you want others to feel? If each person in your life felt valued and loved, they would naturally open up more to you, and everyone would benefit from a deeper relationship.

Pause and think for a moment. Do you provide a safe listening ear for people? It's a high calling, isn't it? As those who follow Christ, we aren't often known for creating a safe place for broken people to express and process their thoughts and ideas. Do we provide a safe place for our family, co-workers, and friends to share their fears? Or are people reluctant to share their thoughts for fear they'll be judged? I agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who reminded us, "Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God."² Friend, how can we effectively minister to and encourage others if we aren't listening? The need is urgent. So what do ya say? Let's figure this out!

Our family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers all need to feel valued and heard. Honestly, I haven't always done this well, but I've been asking the Lord to change me because I am convinced people feel lonely when no one listens to them.

I had a neighbor whom I mistakenly thought didn't like me. I waved and called out to her often, receiving no response in return. I mistakenly thought for a while, *Maybe she doesn't speak English*. One evening I went out to take a walk and she was coming out of her house. I waved and she said she wanted to walk with me. I was a bit shocked! But I agreed and off we went. While we walked for several miles, this precious woman poured out her heart. Her husband had been in the military, and they had married while he was serving overseas. She married young and they were very much in love. He took care of her and provided for her in every way. Her husband had died a few years earlier, and she told me how lonely it had been for her. She has never fully adjusted to his death. Her two grown children both serve in the military and don't live nearby. When I left her that night, she told me how much she enjoyed our time together.

The next day I called out to her, as I had done so many times before. When she didn't answer, I looked a little closer and realized she had earphones on and was listening to music! It dawned on me in that moment that the times I had called out to her, she had never even heard me. I asked the Lord that day to teach me not to make assumptions about people, but rather to take initiative with people to simply listen.

I once saw a homeless man with a sign that read, "Will listen for \$5 per half hour." What a brilliant business plan! That guy is probably a millionaire by now. The homeless man had tapped in to a felt need. Most people are too rushed or distracted to take time to listen. How sad that people need to pay to feel like someone is listening.

As those who claim to love and follow Jesus, we're the ones who should be leading the way and listening to people. Right? If not us, then who? Wouldn't it be great if Christians had the reputation of being great listeners? What does it take for us to change?

Growth involves intentionality. Keep a listening journal as you progress through this book. You might consider some of the following questions:

1. How did I hear God's voice this week?
2. What patterns did I observe in my own heart that might get in the way of being an effective listener?
3. What question did I ask that helped me to understand someone better?
4. What do I need to do differently next time to help me understand more?
5. What action do I need to take to follow up on a conversation from this week?

I'm guessing that, like me, you value your relationships. As you honestly examine your abilities as a listener and cooperate with the Holy Spirit, He will reshape your listening skills, and your relationships will improve. But you have to be willing.

Think about a relationship that's very important to you that you'd like to see improve. It could be with your husband, a parent, your child, or a close friend. Consider for a moment how much you value that connection. In your journal, write down why that relationship is so important to you. Keep that person in mind as you move through the rest of this book. Whenever you feel like the principles in the book are too challenging, or you feel discouraged and ready to give up with that person, ask the Lord to remind you of how important that bond is to you and how much listening will add value to his or her life and your own. The bottom line is this, friend: If you value your relationships, you'll be willing to work at listening so that others around you will feel heard.

Are You Ready to Get Started?

As we move through the rest of this book, we're going to study biblically based, practical listening skills. If you embrace these skills, your relationships will improve! Don't worry, the principles we'll look at aren't complicated. But they do take practice. I promise you, if you faithfully practice and press into the Holy Spirit as your

guide in listening, you will see almost an immediate difference in your interactions with others.

We're going to look at how to:

- Raise your self-awareness
- Honor another's story
- Silence your inner "fixer"
- Ask great questions
- Offer empathy and validate feelings
- Monitor your nonverbal signals
- Seek to understand in a conflict
- Let go of distractions
- Be available

At the end of each chapter you'll find a section called "Exercises to Strengthen Your Ear." Included in this section will be questions and activities divided into three categories: Listening to God, Listening to Your Heart, and Listening to Others.

Listening is like a muscle. The more we develop and train, the stronger our listening skills will become and the more effective we'll become as listeners. I encourage you to open your journal as you move through these exercises so that you can write down your observations about your progress and see how you are doing along the way. I will encourage you to share some of your journal entries with someone you are intentionally trying to be a better listener to in this season of your life.

So here's our first set of exercises. Jesus not only wants to transform your listening skills, but also to use you to make an impact on the lives you intersect with on a daily basis. You have all that you need to do this—ears and an open heart. Let's get started!

EXERCISES TO **Strengthen Your Ear**

Listening to God

1. Listening *to* God is foundational to being able to listen *like* God. One of the ways we can prepare our hearts to listen to God is through worship. Listen to “Holy Spirit” by Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes. As you listen, ask the Holy Spirit to fill your mind with only thoughts that are from Him. After you listen to the song, read John 6:45. Then answer in a journal the following questions:
 - What are some tangible ways to listen to God’s voice?
 - In what ways have you heard God’s voice in the past?
2. Read 1 Samuel 3:1–14. How did Samuel hear God’s voice? What lesson is there for you in this passage?
3. Sit quietly with your eyes closed for at least three minutes. Ask the Lord to speak to you. He might lay something on your heart or bring to your mind a thought from the Scripture you just read. Write down what you felt He spoke.

Listening to Your Heart

Listening to your heart is focused on teaching you to understand what’s in your heart. Until people really understand what’s

in their own hearts, they're often unable to focus their attention on others because, to put it bluntly, their own emotional baggage keeps coming up in their conversations.

Take a few minutes to sit still and ask yourself these questions:

- *Am I worried about anything?* Make a list of all your worries and then release them one by one to the Lord.
- *Am I feeling stressed or overwhelmed?* What are the things that are making you feel stressed or overwhelmed? Make a list.
- *What are some of the destructive patterns that often surface when I am trying to listen to someone?* For example: Do you interrupt? Give unsolicited advice? Try to fix other people's emotions?
- Write out a prayer asking the Lord to help you to stop whatever pattern is surfacing most often. Ask the Lord to remind you throughout the day to be intentional while you're listening to others, to change that destructive pattern.

Listening to Others

In this section I'll give exercises to help you try out your new skills with others. Here are a few to get you started:

- Ask someone close to you what he or she enjoys most about his or her job. As you listen, practice staying focused and fully attentive. Don't interrupt or dive in with a story of your own. Simply listen.
- When your spouse comes home from work or when you get together with a close friend this week, ask him or her to tell you the highlights of their day. While he or she are talking, invite them to tell you more. Verbalize how deeply you appreciate them taking the time to share their thoughts and feelings.

I Dare You

As we close this chapter, I want to challenge you to ask three people who are close to you to take the following survey to rate how you are as a listener. Explain to them that you are working on your listening skills because you value your relationship with them. Clarify that you need their help because you're not always sure how you come across to others in the realm of listening. Then ask them to fill out the simple survey.

I know it might feel scary, but we can't grow if we don't face the truth. Only give the survey to people you really want to invest in, and ask them to please be honest with you. If they rate you low on some part of your listening ability, don't argue or push back on their thoughts. Simply say, "Thank you for being honest with me." Save the survey and, after progressing through this book, give them the survey again and ask them if they've seen any growth on your part.

As you look at the initial feedback from the survey, you might pray this prayer:

Lord, as I reflect on my listening survey results, I realize I have some growing to do. Holy Spirit, over the next few weeks, as I study listening skills from your perspective, I pray that you would change my heart. Shift my focus from myself to others. Fill me with your heart for others. Teach me how to listen and love those closest to me, as well as neighbors and acquaintances. I surrender my ears for a total renovation. Lord, my heart's desire is to learn to listen like Jesus.

After you give this survey, create the space to reflect on the results to see where you may need to pour some extra time into developing yourself as a listener. Often there is a pattern that we can see through someone else's eyes that's so crucial for our growth. Choose to see the positives in this exercise. Look at what you can learn about yourself from someone else's perspective, rather than

think, *Oh no, the truth is coming out about me.* Think of it as an opportunity to invest in an area of your life that sets you apart from others—a magnetic attraction you will possess because you have learned to listen well. Have fun, and anticipate good things coming from this!

Survey—How Would You Rank Me as a Listener?

I am seeking to improve my listening skills because I deeply value my relationship with you. Would you take a few moments to answer these questions? Circle the answer that best fits. Please give me honest feedback.

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1. I am guilty of interrupting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I am present when you talk—not texting, checking email, or looking at social media.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I dive in with my own story or experience.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I give unsolicited advice.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I validate your feelings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. My body language invites you to tell me more.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I seem defensive when my opinions are challenged.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. When you communicate with me you feel hurried.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. When we disagree I offer understanding.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. You feel safe to share your feelings with me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>