

Improve Your Listening Skills

There are two separate and unique types of listening. One type is listening to understand. The second type is listening to respond. **During the discovery phase of the pre-fitting appointment, you must listen to understand.**

As technically trained professionals our inclination is to listen to respond. There is something called the Inverse Listening/Intellect Law that says that the more intelligent a person is, the less likely they are to be a good listener. If you think about it, this makes sense. Really smart and well-educated people want to ensure that their ideas and insights are being heard. They have a natural tendency to want to get their ideas heard – even if they unknowingly and innocently interrupt others in the process.

When we are sitting face to face with a patient for the five hundredth time, it is easy to anticipate what the patient is going to say. In fact, it is quite common and even expected that we interject our opinions and thoughts throughout the process. Those that **listen to understand** with skill and effectiveness know that the **discovery phase** of the appointment is the patient's time. They know that they need to allow the patient time to respond in a thoughtful manner, and they resist all temptation to talk when the patient has the floor. In order to improve your ability to listen to understand, take the time to occasionally repeat or paraphrase what the patient just said. Below is a 5-step process designed to help you do a better job of listening to understand. These five skills are easy to talk about but often difficult to execute. If you doubt my words, focus on what you are actually doing during your next appointment with a patient.

1. Square up with your shoulders and face the patient. This sends the message that you are focused on what the patient is going to say. Squaring your shoulders also sends the message of respect.
2. Look them in the eyes. When you fail to look the patient in the eyes during the conversation, it sends the message that you are not interested in them. When you are talking with one person, you should be looking them in the eyes about 70% of the time. More than 70% is considered staring. Less than 50% is perceived as disinterest.
3. Smile. This will send the message that you are open minded and pleasant to work with. In short, having a smile will break down barriers.
4. Nod your head. This sends the message that you are following the conversation and trying to have a good relationship with the patient.
5. Take Notes. On a blank COSI/HEAR form, start taking notes. To go one step further, tell the patient that you need to capture as many details as possible and you need to take notes during the conversation. Think about this: People like it (and probably feel more important) when you take notes during a conversation. Lastly, taking notes on the COSI allows you to slow down and ask more open-ended questions when needed.