



ACTIVE LISTENING FOR VOLUNTEERS

The first thing to note about being an Active Listener is that you already are one! We have all experienced moments of total engagement and involvement in which every part of our body is participating in understanding and connecting to an experience. What we usually aren't aware of is how to turn our natural active listening ability ON.

Practicing active listening while on your trip is one of the best ways to gain full insight to the culture and uniqueness of the individuals and community with which you will be working. This type of interaction encourages people to start talking and sharing on an incredibly personal level, which is one of the special aspects that Village Volunteers' programs offer. It is important when listening to the stories of those you meet to consider *how* something is said, not just *what* is said. Through your tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions, you physically show people to what extent you are invested in hearing what they have to share.

When you actively listen, you are more able to understand your speaker's needs than when you don't give him/her your full attention. In turn, you are in a better position to acknowledge and absorb the information and experiences they have to offer on a personal level. Often, listening – something everyone can do- is one of the most important contributions you will make as a Village Volunteer!

Here are ten tips to becoming an active listener:

1. **Open your mind and ears:** Don't allow conceptions of the speaker to interfere with the present conversation.
2. **Listen from the first sentence:** During your interaction, put aside or forget whatever may distract from your ability to give your full attention to the conversation. If you appear preoccupied, your speaker will know it and may feel unimportant.
3. **Analyze what is being said:** You shouldn't try to figure out or anticipate what the speaker will say. Rather, you should pay attention to exactly what he or she is saying. *Even the slowest listeners can think faster than the fastest talkers.*
4. **Listen, don't just not talk:** You should not only appear to be listening; you should also actively assist the speaker in conveying his/her message. If you don't give feedback (verbal and/or non-verbal cues) to what the speaker is saying, he/she may feel you are not truly listening.

5. **Never interrupt, but always be interruptible:** This is invaluable. Interrupting your speaker is rude in any culture and will greatly reduce your chances of making a connection. Conversely, while it is unlikely, if you allow the speaker to interrupt you, you appear to truly care about what he or she is saying.
6. **Ask Questions:** To stimulate people to talk and help you clarify your understanding of what they mean, let them know you are taking them seriously by drawing them out. When you ask questions, you reinforce the idea that you are truly listening, not simply standing there and waiting for your turn to speak. Make sure you ask facilitative questions – aka, not questions that may be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”. Show your engagement by asking questions that require you to listen and participate in the answer!
7. **Remember what is said:** This involves logging important points into your mental computer. You should take notes if necessary and try to make connections between apparently isolated remarks. Paraphrasing and/or clarifying after listening quietly and attentively can show the speaker you are invested in what they are telling you. For instance if a person is talking about how difficult it has been for them to get an education, you might say *“Its sounds like it’s very challenging to get an education. How have you been able to get as far as you have?”*
8. **Block out interruption and distractions:** This is essential in becoming an effective, active listener. You should concentrate so fully that you don’t notice visual or audible distractions. When you allow outside factors to steal your attention, your speaker may assume that your original attention was forced, dramatically decreasing your chances of making a deep connection.
9. **Be responsive:** You should get your whole body involved in listening. In other words, pay attention to your body language. Have a comfortable, relaxed body position. Lean slightly forward with relaxed arms. Do not fold your arms or look away. Nod your head and smile when appropriate. Maintain eye-contact.
10. **Stay cool:** You should be completely at ease throughout the entire conversation with your speaker. Your calmness and relaxation will likely rub off on your speaker, creating a stress free and open environment.

The bottom line is that people appreciate when you show you care. Active listening creates a relationship of mutual respect and interest. It is one of the best ways to gain someone’s trust and friendship, and will often be mirrored by those you speak with. It also applies the values and mission of Village Volunteers; to encourage and spread cultural learning, immersion, and understanding. Every individual you will encounter on this exciting adventure has their own unique story. Being an active participant in the telling of those stories is how you stumble upon those that haven’t yet been told!

Information taken from:

ACTIVE LISTENING EXERCISES:

1. Break into groups of two. One person is a speaker, the other is a listener. The speaker should spend roughly 3-5 minutes giving a short autobiography (ie: highlighting key experiences and/or memories that are particularly important or meaningful). The listener is to employ the active listening techniques listed above to retain as much of the information as possible. Once the speaker is finished, it is the listener's job to paraphrase what they have heard. They are then to think of five facilitative questions (questions that do not have a "yes" or "no" answer) based on the information they have just been told. Once this process is complete, switch roles, and repeat!

For Example: If the speaker says they are a nurse, the listener can then ask, "What life experiences helped you decide to become a nurse?" "Why did you want to become a nurse?"

2. Split your team into groups of three. In the small groups, have them take turns telling their short story/brief autobiography, emphasizing what they feel is the most important point for their listeners to remember. After everyone has shared their story, re-assemble the large group into a circle. One by one, each team member will ask a question aloud regarding that key point from their personal story. The two other group members will then each have the opportunity to answer the question. This activity will help participants' assess how actively they were listening. Have fun, and don't stress if people cannot remember the answer to the question. In all likelihood, they still know more about the speaker than they did before!