

Put Your Headphones On

By Dexter Faulkner

My teenage son tells me that when he wants to really listen to a favorite CD or MP3, he plugs in his iPod and puts on his headphones. Other noises are blocked out. The sound is like being in the middle of the recording studio. You can catch all the nuances without turning the volume to an ear-damaging level to cover outside noises. It's "total listening", he tells me.

We probably listen more than we do any other human activity except breathe. Listening is important to success in many aspects of life — socially, educationally and in family relationships too.

How would you describe your listening ability? Would you rate it as "total listening", tuning in and out or completely turned off? And most important, how would your friends and family describe your listening ability? Do you listen to others as you like to be listened to?

These are hard questions, but sometimes we should stop and think about them and give ourselves honest answers.

One of the greatest gifts

The value of really listening to another or being listened to is difficult to estimate. Suffice it to say, one of the greatest gifts we can give to our family and friends (or anybody for that matter) is *total listening*.

Again, ask yourself, How is my listening ability? How often do I have to ask people to repeat something they just said? How well do I hear and remember names?

Do you *want* to listen better? If you do, you have already taken a big step in increasing your listening abil-



ity. One way to keep your motivation going is to count the things you learn about your friends and family each time you listen.

Second, avoid interrupting. Concentrate on what is being said. Try to create an atmosphere for communication. You can do this by stopping whatever else you're doing and facing the person talking to you.

One of the biggest problems in listening is that we fail to *focus* on the other person's point of view or idea. It's human nature to want to pass on *our* ideas, feelings, opinions, convictions and jokes. And we want to tell our own thoughts instantly — without even waiting until the other person has finished talking. We interrupt and often change the subject at the same time.

Often the nonverbal interruptions are the most annoying. An impatient look, a sigh, a glance around the room, crossed arms, drumming fingers on chair or table — these and other mannerisms are ways of stat-

ing, without a word: "Are you through now? I'm not really listening and I want to talk or be on my way."

The way to let people know we are really tuned in, with our headphones on, is to listen with our bodies. Stop what you are doing and turn to the speaker with your eyes, ears and the rest of your body.

Listening is a gift you can give, no matter who you are. And you can give it to anyone. It doesn't cost a cent, but it's priceless to a person who needs a listener — and we all do. Whoever you are, you can start today to become a better listener. Concentrate on what is being said and see how much you can learn when you put your headphones on!

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