

Prepare to Listen

Why is it Important?

When you are autistic, the way you listen to others may not always necessarily align with the common way neurotypicals show that they are listening. This doesn't necessarily mean that you are a bad listener, just that you may take and process information differently than other people.

Identify how you Listen Best

How does your listening style align with common neurotypical listening expectations? Some examples:

- **Eye contact** — When interacting with someone, do you make eye contact?
- **Open posture** — An “open posture” is sitting or standing with your hands apart or resting on the arms of a chair, as opposed to holding them close to your body
- **Facing your body toward the conversation partner**
- **Minimal fidgeting or other movements** — Fidgeting while listening is considered by neurotypicals to be a sign of distraction, and therefore, not paying attention
- **Nodding**
- **Mirroring the speaker's facial expressions** — Mirroring is copying the actions/expressions of another person, i.e. smiling when they are smiling
- **Brief verbal encouragers** – “Mm-hmm”, “really?”, “And?”, “Yeah”, “Oh?”, “What?”, “Uh-huh”, etc.

Assess the Needs of the Current Situation

Determine the best way to listen to your conversation partner, depending on the situation.

- **Decide what you want out of the conversation** - You may find it necessary to try and meet the expectations of your conversation by trying to get your conversation partner to react a certain way. However, following other's expectations of you could impact your ability to listen or make your conversation partner feel that they weren't truly seen or heard.
- **Choose if you want to share your listening style** - You could let your conversation partner know what listening looks like for you in order to establish a shared understanding. For example, letting your partner know that fidgeting when someone is talking to you helps you process verbal information better, and doesn't mean that you are distracted/not paying attention. Be mindful that not everyone will understand the unique way you process the world, even after you disclose the unique way you listen to them.

Establish a shared understanding

For serious conversations and for conversations with people important to you, you may want to take the time to figure out together what your unique listening patterns look like. Your conversation partner, for example, may not fidget when they speak, and make direct eye contact with you the whole time. You, conversely, may fidget frequently when being spoken to, and may have a hard time maintaining eye contact. Consider asking yourself.

- **How do I listen best?**
- **How does my conversation partner listen best?**
- **How does my conversation partner feel heard?**
- **What can I do to make them feel seen and heard?**