

The Keys to Good Listening

At the center of the Good Talk is the ability to keep your emotions under control in order that you can make sense of and understand what your partner is saying to you. Partners employ the following techniques for two powerful reasons. Obviously, feeling statements and restatements make sure that the content of the message is conveyed and received as unambiguously as possible. Yet equally important is the role of these tactics in slowing the couple down from the potential for emotional escalation that would block meaningful dialogue. Despite their aspects of artificiality and 1970s “California speak,” they are introducing an opportunity for *mindfulness* that allows each partner a little breathing room to step back from a precipice of conflict, accusation, and defensiveness. They can offer a placeholder that allows both partners to remind themselves of their own and their partner’s good intentions. The belief in these good intentions—(Commitment to a Stronger “We”) and (Assumption of Love in the Room) is the calming voice that pulls us back from the dangerous edge. Without it, the phrases, “I want to make sure I understand” or “Do I have this right?” can certainly be turned by irony or intonation into tools of mockery or counterattack (“Just so I understand—you plan to continue to humiliate me at parties by flirting and ignoring me while I stand in a corner looking pathetic. Do I have this right?”). The mistake that many couples *and* couple therapists make is thinking that practicing these listening techniques will build trust and good faith. In reality, couples must have already committed to a strong reserve of good will for the power of the phrases and questions to take hold.

1. **Statement of the Problem** (“I feel that you are spending too much time at work. When you come home, you can barely keep your eyes open.”)
2. **Restatement of the Problem by Partner** (“You feel like I am working too much and that I tend to fall asleep at home when I am not working. Do I have this right?”)
3. **Confirmation** (“Yes, that’s it. You have it right.”)
4. **Validating Statement** (“I can understand that this would make you feel lonely and that I am unavailable.”)
5. **Gratitude for Validation** (“It feels really good that you are truly getting what I mean.”)
6. **Movement Toward the “We”** (“Do you think we can talk together about ways to make this different?”)

In this last phrase, we see how the couple allows this initial good listening to be the platform for constructive dialogue that will yield a concrete plan of action.