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17 Subtle Signs You're a Poor Listener, According to Experts

DOES YOUR POOR LISTENING HAVE PEOPLE THINKING YOU'RE A BAD CONVERSATIONALIST? IT'S TIME TO FIND OUT!

By ALEX DANIEL
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→ With text messages vibrating, news alerts popping up, and constant feeds of content, it's harder than ever to have a **distraction-free** conversation. But technology aside, there are some things we could all be doing to be **more engaged** when we're talking with other people. Even those of us who **pride ourselves on being great listeners** could probably learn a thing or two. Because the truth is, some of the things you're doing that you *think* prove **how attentive you are**—like nodding in agreement, keeping your thoughts to yourself, or sharing a similar story—are actually signs of **poor listening skills**. To help you be a more engaged listener, we talked to body language experts, psychologists, and other professionals for the definitive list of signs you might have some work to do when it comes to listening.

1 | You interrupt.



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It might seem obvious that someone who interrupts is not the best listener. But what you may not realize is that some of the ways you're trying to show just how interested you are in a



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conversation are actually forms of interrupting.

"Some of us may have good intentions thinking we know what the other person is about to say and in an effort to bring them to the finish line, we complete the sentence for them," explain **James and Suzann Pawelski**, co-authors of *Happy Together: Using the Science of Positive Psychology to Build Love That Lasts*. "Even if we are accurate about what the person is about to say, interrupting is almost always perceived by others as **very rude** and intrusive. And at the end of the day, we are not mind readers. We should let the other person finish and give them the respect and time needed to finish stating their ideas."

2 | You turn the conversation back to yourself.



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Another sign you might not be a great listener is if you tend to shift every topic back to yourself. And you might not even realize you're doing it. For example, the person you're talking to excitedly tells you about their trip to Italy, so you bring up your visit there five years ago. Or maybe your conversation mate talks about having to move, and you tell them about how you had to move last year. At a certain point, it stops being a matter of commiserating or sympathizing, and **shifts into self-absorption**.

"Many people aren't actively listening to what someone else is saying, but rather waiting for the other person to finish so they can jump in and hijack the conversation," note the Pawelskis. "This is a **negative behavior** that can easily cause problems in professional and personal relationships because it comes across as selfish. When we immediately turn the focus of the conversation to ourselves, we are indirectly telling the other person that we don't care about what they are saying."

3 | You don't ask questions.



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A conversation is an exchange of ideas and information, and it should really go in two directions. That means you should be asking the person you're speaking with **informed questions** to show you are interested in what they have to say.

"Conversations die an awkward death when questions are not asked," says dating expert **Celia Schweyer** of [DatingRelationshipsAdvice.com](https://www.datingrelationshipsadvice.com). "Apart from the conversation dying out, your lack of questions means you didn't care enough to follow the conversation; it can even say you didn't care about the person talking."

4 | You nod excessively.

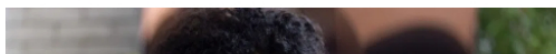


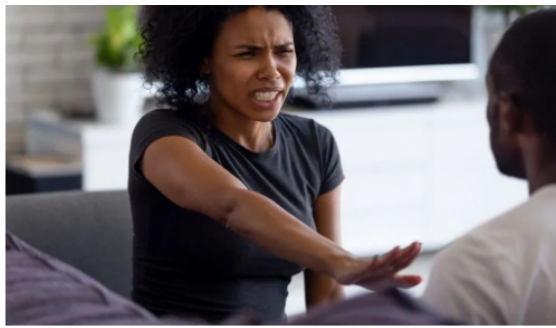
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Nodding along as someone tells you something is often perceived as a **positive type of body language**, helping to show that you are listening carefully. But if it seems like you're just going through the motions, the person with whom you're speaking will pick up on that.

"Nodding is usually a sign that the listener understood what the speaker is saying," adds Schweyer. "But doing it too much just indicates that you are not listening and just humoring the speaker, only pretending to be interested in the conversation."

5 | You get defensive.





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Whether it's discussing what color to paint the living room **with your partner** or chatting with a colleague about a big work project, it's not uncommon to react defensively if you feel your opinions aren't being heard or are somehow being questioned. But it's likely that defensive reaction is not because the other person is saying something offensive, but rather because you aren't actually listening to what they are saying.

"If you don't agree with what the other person is saying, pause, ask questions, try to be positive [and] respectful, and seek to understand their viewpoint," suggest the Pawelskis. "Then, in a calm and thoughtful manner, you can bring up any concerns later, only after you've listened to them and really tried to understand their viewpoint."

6 | You hurry the speaker along.



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Sure, you're a busy person—we all are. But that's no excuse for nudging the person you are speaking with along so that they get to their point quicker.

"Glancing at your watch or surveying your surroundings while talking with someone are indicators that you'd rather be somewhere else," says Schweyer. "If you do this, you're sending the speaker the message that you're not interested in the conversation anymore, and you've run out of patience talking to them."

7 | You exhibit unwelcoming body language.



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Body language is an essential part of communication—and that's true of **negative body language** as well as the positive. Ticks and fidgeting not only convey to others that you are nervous or uncomfortable, they tell anyone you are speaking with that you aren't fully engaged in the conversation.

As body language expert **Carol Kinsey Gorman** told *Forbes*, "Trust is established through a perfect alignment between what is being said and the body language that accompanies it. If your gestures are not in full congruence with your verbal message, people subconsciously perceive duplicity, uncertainty, or—at the very least—internal conflict."

8 | You avoid eye contact.



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One of the major forms of body language that sets the good listeners apart from the bad is **eye contact**.

"When we avoid looking at our conversational partners, we tend to miss the non-verbal cues—facial expression, body posture, gesticulation—that create an emotional context for what people are communicating," says **Kristin Bianchi**, a licensed psychologist who specializes in treating anxiety disorders.

While she says that avoiding eye contact can sometimes be rooted in anxiety or disorders that may require more involved treatments, in many cases, it's just due to the fact that your

attention is wandering. "Quite often, our eye contact is undermined by talking while we're splitting our attention between our conversation partner and a distracting object in our immediate environment such as smartphones, laptops, [and] TV," says Bianchi.

9 | You notice that people frequently say to you, "I already told you about that, remember?"



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The most likely reason you don't remember something someone is sure they told you about is that you weren't listening very well to begin with. "The less attuned that we are to a conversation, the less likely our brains will encode it in **long-term memory**, and we can't remember what we never really 'heard' in the first place," says Bianchi. "While conditions like anxiety, depression, grief, ADHD, brain injuries, and dementia can interfere—with varying degrees of severity—with our memory, if we're not impaired by those challenges, we might be mistaking 'forgetting' for 'careless listening.'"

10 | You can't wait for your turn to speak.



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In an energized conversation, it's natural to be excited to chime in or respond to whatever is being said. But there's a difference between being enthusiastic and anxiously tapping your foot as you wait for the speaker to finish so that you can offer up your opinion on whatever they're discussing.

"You're so eager to speak you're not hearing some of what's being said," says **Halelly Azulay**, a leadership development strategist and founder and CEO of **TalentGrow LLC**. "You might learn something, or change your mind, or maybe even agree if you just took the time to listen to the whole message the speaker is communicating before barging in or interrupting them."

11 | Or you aren't saying anything at all.



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Even if the person you are speaking with is a big talker, that doesn't mean it's acceptable for you to be a passive part of the conversation. "Silence speaks volumes," says **Sonya Schwartz**, relationship expert at **Her Norm**. "Isn't it terrible to try connecting with someone who is just not there? Communication is always the key. Give advice, be empathetic, support using your words, hold their hand—this would change the dynamics and can make their day."

12 | You spend your time listening trying to formulate a response.



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If you're too worried about what you're going to say in response to someone, chances are high you're missing out on a pivotal part of the conversation. "When someone speaks, they are describing what they think, know, need, or feel to the listener," says Azulay. "The listener needs to be listening to their message in order to receive it and process its meaning. If your brain is busy thinking of a response, it cannot simultaneously also be focused on receiving the communicated message being sent from the speaker. Your brain cannot multitask on this. So if you're formulating your response, you're not listening—period."

- 13 | You already know what the person you're talking to is going to say next.



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It might seem like you are so actively engaged in the conversation that you are able to finish the speaker's sentences. But rather than being an engaged listener, this is a sign that you're steamrolling them instead.

Picture this: "Something the other person said has reminded us of a similar, humorous, [or] totally unrelated experience that we had, and now we can't wait to share it," says **KC McCormick Çiftçi**, founder of relationship advice website **Borderless Stories**. "But while you're hoping that person will fully appreciate the story you're about to tell, you're not giving them that same respect. If the other person is inclined to do the same thing, this can turn into a vicious circle of barely related stories as you try to **one-up each other** [instead of] actually listening."

- 14 | You often forget the name of the person you're talking to.



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Everyone's been in this situation, so you might be quick to dismiss it. But if you find yourself consistently **forgetting people's names**, it might be a sign of a deeper inattention that you could take steps to overcome.

"Many of us say we're 'bad at names,' but we can improve at something if we give importance to it," says Çiftçi. "By accepting that we're simply 'bad at names,' we give ourselves permission to not even try. But if this is someone whose name matters—and they all do—then why not try one of the **many tricks we've surely already heard** for remembering names?"

- 15 | Or you're clearly thinking about something else entirely.



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When you're having a conversation with someone, it's not also the time to go over all the other things you need to get done that day. If you find yourself thinking through a grocery list or trying to remember what phone calls you need to make, you aren't being a good listener. "If your brain is busy making a list and checking it twice, there's no way it's also listening," says Azulay.

- 16 | You avoid discussing topics that don't interest you.



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No one wants to find themselves stuck in a conversation about a topic they find painfully boring. But it's a fact of life that, every now and then, you will end up having to discuss something that might not be of great interest to you personally.

"These might not be the most rewarding of social exchanges, but **in order to be socially effective, and polite**, it's important to offer conversational reciprocity no matter the topic," says Bianchi. "We don't have to converse for hours on subjects that don't interest us, but just as we want to feel heard, we owe it to others to listen."

17 | You head for the door.



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It may sound obvious, but sometimes the body language of a bad listener can take the form of walking toward the exit in the middle of an exchange. "This prevents you from having meaningful conversation and rushes the other person," says **Lynell Ross**, founder and managing editor of **Zivadream**, which provides advice on wellness and relationships. "If you need to leave, just be honest and say so, but listen intently as they are speaking."

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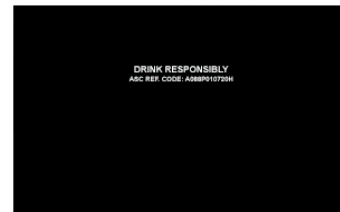
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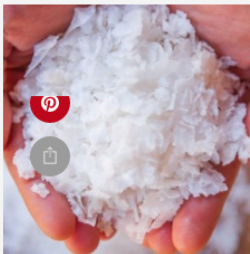
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