

# Understanding the Art of Active Listening in Healthcare



Reading time:  
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An important cause of medical errors and unintentional harm to patients is ineffective communication and that is why active listening is a core competency of successful communication in healthcare practice.

Despite the commonly held belief that communication skills are innate and intuitive; many studies prove that effective communication is a set of teachable behaviours which can be honed with appropriate training and support <sup>1</sup>.

For primary care practitioners, especially GPs, consultations for minor ailments constitute a large part of the workload. Regardless of the severity of ailment, GPs still need to demonstrate affective communication skills like those required to listen actively that are therapeutic and ameliorative to provide support to patients <sup>2</sup>.

## Regulatory considerations

### Medical Board Code of Conduct (4.3.1) and Dental Board code (3.3a)

Listening to patients, asking for and respecting their views about their health, and responding to their concerns and preferences.

## Professional considerations

### Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP)

CS1.1 Communicate effectively and appropriately to provide quality care.

- Effective communication is the culmination of a number of important skills and attitudes, including utilising attentive listening (active and reflective)

# Australian College of Emergency Medicine (ACEM)

1.2 Apply understanding of principles of good communication and active listening to communication in practice.

## Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM)

CG.S.10 Provide a range of talking treatments including: empathic/active listening.

AS.S.1 Obtain a comprehensive mental health history, including effective communication with patients in a respectful, empathic and empowering manner, with effective listening skills, an appreciation of different patient decision-making processes, an ability to interpret body language and an ability to recognise hidden agendas.

## Skills required for active listening

Appropriate body movement and posture showing involvement:

- Facial expressions
- Eye contact
- Showing interest in the speaker's words
- Attentive silence
- Reflecting back feelings and content.

## 5 behaviours to ensure active listening

- Avoiding interruption
- Maintaining interest
- Postponing evaluation
- Organising information
- Showing interest.

## MIPS' advice to minimise your medico-legal risk

- Avoid unnecessary distractions.
- Look directly at the person with whom you are engaged in conversation.
- Ask questions to confirm your understanding:
  - "Can you give me an example of . . ."
  - "How frequently does this happen?"
- Restate and reflect to the patient what you understood them to have said. Clarify the message they are conveying to you.
  - "What I hear you saying is . . ."
- Avoid making conclusions too quickly
  - Let the patient finish speaking and then clarify their meaning before you formulate your response.

## MIPS resources

- [Practising with care - Resolving difficult patient interactions](#)
- [Communication - it doesn't have to be so clinical](#)
- [MIPS on Demand Online modules with CPD](#)

## References

<sup>1</sup>Tennant, K., Long, A., & Toney-Butler, T. J. (2017). Active listening.

<sup>2</sup>Fassaert, T., van Dulmen, S., Schellevis, F., & Bensing, J. (2007). Active listening in medical consultations: Development of the Active Listening Observation Scale (ALOS-global). *Patient education and counseling*, 68(3), 258-264.

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