

# The Crucial Question For These Noisy Times May Just Be: 'Huh?'

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of filtering out sound: They needed and welcomed it. Most of their days were spent in the isolation of a home or field without television, telephone, radio or even neighbors. The sound of distant horses' hooves could mean mortal danger, and a snappy harmonica offered the audio pleasure of a symphony orchestra. When listening was a matter of survival, there were few more comforting sounds than human voices. With little visual entertainment, people would patiently listen to itinerant lecturers, politicians or preachers deliver three- or four-hour perorations. Because there was no way of replaying speech, if people didn't hear it when spoken, they would never hear it.

Perhaps the fact that listening was once a matter of life and death explains why the educational establishment teaches students to read, write and speak, but rarely to listen. "We think listening is innate, but it's not, it's a skill," says Kathryn Dindia, a professor in the department of communication at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. "We spend a huge amount of our waking hours listening, but we aren't taught how to do it." In fact, children's listening skills actually decline as they grow older.

Listening can be taught, experts agree, but it isn't as easy as it looks. For one thing, good listening requires that people banish their own prejudices and try to see the world through the speaker's eye. "Whenever we listen thoroughly to another person's ideas, we open ourselves up to the possibility that some of our own ideas are wrong," wrote R.G. Nichols and L.A. Stevens in their 1957 book, "Are You Listening?"

"To be a good listener," Ms. Thompson says, "you have to forgo your own ego and put the other person first. You have to shut off the talking inside your own head." That concept is completely foreign to many people, particularly those who are constantly surrounded by sycophantic listeners.

## 'Dialogues of the Deaf'

Yet wanting to be listened to is a universal desire. "It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood," wrote the Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier. "Listen to all the conversations of our world, between nations as well as those between couples. They are for the most part dialogues of the deaf."

The shortage of listeners means "crowded appointment books for therapists, psychologists and support groups," says Carolyn Gwynn Coakley, co-author of the book "Listening," who teaches seminars on listening. "People are going elsewhere to get the listeners they should have with their families or friends." They are paying for something that was once free.

The deterioration in listening skills also creates a deadly downward spiral with the art of speaking. Conversations becoming dueling or intersecting monologues or monologues in the presence of a witness. Long-winded speakers turn thousands of business meetings a day into tests of mental endurance. "Sometimes people don't listen well because it's boring," says Spring Asher, a partner of Speechworks. "Someone says, 'Good afternoon, I'm glad to be here today,' they're just doing this blah, blah, blah. You could die. Start with a story or grab them with a 'gee whiz' fact. You have to be a storyteller."

One of the obvious byproducts of the imbalance between talkers and listeners is interruption, with three or four people talking and no one listening. Tune in to any number of television talk shows and notice how frequently the participants' voices "overlap," as linguists describe interrupting. (Obnoxious interrupting is called "uncooperative overlap.") "The idea is to be aggressive and competitive," says Sam

Nelson, director of debate at the University of Rochester in New York. "If it's more like a fight, it's more like a sporting event, and as spectators we enjoy it more. It's more exciting."

## Talk-Show Strategy

Rick Davis, senior executive producer of the Washington talk show "Crossfire," has a different analogy. If four friends go out to dinner, and they have differing views on a topic they all know something about, there will naturally be times when everyone's talking, he says. "Most people aren't used to seeing that on television, but they're used to seeing it in real life. We don't totally discourage interruption because it's natural, but we know viewers don't like it when everyone is talking at the same time." Adds Amy Rosenblum, co-producer of the "Sally Jessy Raphael Show," "A guest who can't interrupt isn't a good guest for a talk show. We only try to stop it when there's cross talk, when guest one is talking about his infidelity while guest two is talking about his mother-in-law."

Mr. Davis is absolutely correct that there is a lot of interrupting going on around the nation's dinner tables. "We have become a nation of interrupters," says Ms. Thompson of Alverno College. "At our house we warn new friends to be careful because we treat conversation like a competitive sport. The first one to take a breath is considered the listener."

That's true in many business meetings, too, when several people may be vying for the boss's attention, and none much cares what his or her competitors are saying. "People want to take credit for things," Mr. Nelson says. "If you're the first person to get it out, it's yours. So you go into the meeting thinking, 'I'm going to get this out if it kills me.'" That also helps explain the disappearance of the pause from many people's speech. "A pause signals that you have a sense of confidence," Ms. Chambers says. "I hear women say they're scared to pause because people will jump in and they'll lose control."

Gender differences in speaking and listening have been a popular topic of research in recent years, with the consensus generally being that women are more sympathetic listeners than men and their interruptions more supportive than

intrusive. Men's conversation tends to be an exchange of information, and they reach their point more quickly. In male-female conversations, men tend to dominate by speaking more. But, writes Deborah Tannen, author of "You Just Don't Understand," men dominating conversations "is not always the result of an intention to dominate."

Becoming a good listener carries some risks. Talkers attach themselves to listeners like barnacles to boats, and detaching them isn't easy. How do the experts handle the predatory prattler? Mr. Steil advocates a polite but firm, "I'm sorry, I'd love to talk more, but I have work to do." Other people carry headsets, often attached to nothing, as a defensive weapon. Ms. Coakley, the author, suggests something like, "At this point, I really can't be the listener I want to be and feel you need." To a nonstop talker on the telephone, Ms. Bentley recommends, "I know you're busy, so I won't keep you any longer." Depending on your relationship with the speaker, say all the experts, at some point it may be appropriate to say, "Get to the point."

The point is this: The world needs more good listeners, people like the world-famous listener Jacqueline Onassis. And like the Bill Clinton character in Joe Klein's "Primary Colors," whose "big ears" listened so aggressively it was as if "he were hearing quicker than you can get the words out, as if he were sucking the information out of you." A good listener has an animated face, makes eye contact and pays attention to the hundreds of nonverbal cues that orchestrate the typical discussion.

"Think about keeping the tennis ball in play," Ms. Chambers says. "You're not trying to lob it over the other one's head, and you're not trying to kill it. But you're also not trying to keep it going so long that no one gets the point. Each side gives something, each side gets something."