

How To Listen on the Sidewalk Guide

This guide is your key to practicing your listening in your community, safely, and effectively.

Please take note: by engaging in this listening practice, you assume your own risk. While we're sharing our expertise with you, it's essential to understand that you are solely responsible for matters such as safety and liability. We will teach you how to be safe and responsible. The rest is up to you to create.

STEP 1: LISTENING SKILLS BASICS

[Donate here](#) for the full Sidewalk Talk Listening Training Program
[Learn more here](#) about the HEAR LIVE Training

Listening is a skill that requires practice; it's not something that comes naturally. Mastery of listening means integrating it into your daily habits and practicing often.

1. Practicing 100% Full Attention:

- Listen attentively to what the other person is saying, understanding the story behind their words.
- Pay attention to their facial expressions and body language to grasp the complete message and have our non-verbals mirror theirs.
- If you can't give your attention for whatever reason, end the listening session.

2. Practicing Silence:

- Avoid interrupting the speaker.
- Manage internal thoughts to maintain full attention.

3. Practicing Openness:

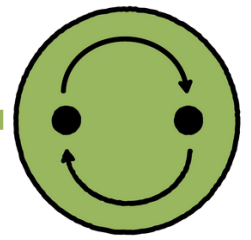
- Refrain from passing judgment or giving unsolicited advice.
- Maintain open body language and a relaxed demeanor.
- Support your nervous system to stay grounded and centered, recognizing that the speaker's emotions are their experience.

4. Practicing Curiosity:

- Ask thoughtful "Open - Ended" questions to help the speaker explore their feelings and thoughts further.

5. Practicing Respect:

- Build trust by validating the speaker's experience, even if you don't necessarily agree.
- Use statements like "I hear you" or "I understand" to acknowledge their perspective without judgment.
- Respect yourself. If you don't feel safe speak up. "I am sorry, I am not able to give you my full attention and will need to stop listening now."



STEP 2: LISTEN ON THE SIDEWALK

SETUP: Go with a buddy. Find a spot you feel safe, warm, and comfortable setting up chairs where you are likely to get good foot traffic. Bring water, sunscreen, chairs, and wear your Sidewalk Talk shirt if you like but leave personal belongings at home. A handmade sign that says “Free Listening” and “We are a Community Listening Project” and the URL for Sidewalk Talk at the bottom helps folks know you are legit and you aren’t selling anything or preaching anything. And please don’t sell or preach anything. Double check you aren’t on private property or don’t need a permit with your city.

ROLES: You can decide to have one person stand and greet people and explain why you are out there listening. And you can have one person seated waiting to listen. Or, if it is just two of you, you can both sit and greet people while seated. A great greeting statement is “Would you like to be listened to today? We are a community listening project, offering free listening.” Greeters are helpful as they prevent people from interrupting you with questions about the project while you are listening. If you won’t have a greeter make a good sign. We made this QR code and URL so if someone wants to know why you are out there they can simply go to this page and it will explain everything to them in short simple language.

LISTENING: When a person sits you can open with a good question that you use. What is the most important thing in your life right now that you would like to share? In general we try to listen for around 10 minutes but that is not a hard rule. To close a listening session you can say “Our time is almost up. We have another two minutes. Is there anything else you want to share before we say goodbye?” Hugs are welcome if you are comfy with hugs. ***Surrender to having no talkers sit down. Your willingness to listen is the work, not the actual listening. If you pressure yourself to “perform” listening you will get anxious and grumpy. Letting go of being an “achiever” is YOUR practice today. Be a calm loving light on the sidewalk.***



Solutions to Common Challenges

Tourists Looking for Directions:

The main aim is to keep the interaction brief, so you can focus on engaging possible talkers/sharers. You can also say, “I’m sorry I’m unable to provide you with more help right now.”

Heckled, Hit On, or Invaded in any way:

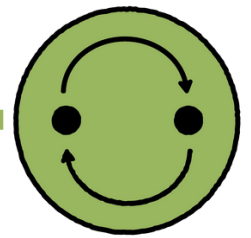
The greeter and listener may politely ask anyone to leave the area. If a person stays and continues to be disruptive, your best course is to gather your things and leave the area for a break. Chances are, in a few minutes, the disrupter will have left and you can return to your listening space.

Hug/Touch:

This is at your own discretion. Only do what feels comfortable to you and your speaker with verbal consent.

Ethics:

Sidewalk Talk is not psychotherapy. We are providing heart-centered listening. You may, however, provide someone with a referral to additional support. Therapists and coaches are not to solicit for clients or sell services to speakers. Know the laws in your community and if you have a legal duty to report abuse or danger to self or other.



STEP 3: RISK ASSESSMENT

When someone confides in you about feeling suicidal, it's crucial to assess the situation. Take a breath and ask directly. This is being a good citizen.

Gathering key information can help determine the level of risk and appropriate actions to take.

1. **ACTION:** Determine if the individual has ever acted on suicidal thoughts in the past. If yes, inquire about the timing of such actions.
2. **PLAN:** Explore whether they have a specific plan for carrying out suicide. Ask directly about their intentions and if they have set a date or time for their actions.
3. **MEANS:** Assess whether they have access to the means to carry out their plan. For example, if they mention a method like shooting themselves, verify if they have access to firearms.
4. **IMPULSIVITY:** Evaluate whether the person is in an agitated state that could lead to impulsive self-harm actions.

If the answers to these questions suggest a risk of harm, it may be necessary to report the situation to the appropriate authorities or pull out your cell phone on the street and call a crisis line together, for more help in making that decision together. Crisis lines are a great resource for you with your listener. Have numbers handy.

Look for the signs:

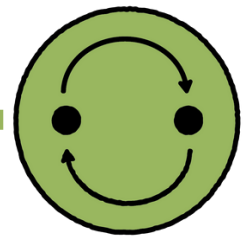
- Does the individual have a concrete plan and access to the means for self-harm?
- Are they exhibiting signs of agitation or impulsivity?
- Consider contacting authorities if you believe there is a risk of harm to themselves or others.



With a little Googling you can make a list of community services in your area to print and take with you to the sidewalk. If someone needs a referral you can write down the info for them or call a number with them. Things to include are;

1. **Crisis Line Numbers**
2. **Shelters**
3. **Food Pantry**
4. **Mental Health Crisis Service**
5. **Domestic Violence and Abuse Numbers**
6. **Active adult programs**

You will feel really empowered having a list like this on hand. Often Sidewalk Talk helps spread the good word of community support services people didn't know existed.



SUPPLIES

1. **SHIRTS** : You can wear whatever you would like or you can get Sidewalk Talk shirts [here](#).
2. **CHAIRS**: Some people have tiny portable stools that fit in a backpack. Others carry camping chairs. Still others use a park bench. Some bring out tables, rugs, and flower pots. You do you. But sitting says “You deserve to slow down and be receptive to care and attention.” We like the sitting bit as a provoker on a busy sidewalk.
3. **SIGNS**: We give graphics to chapter leaders for fancy printed signs. Honestly, home made signs feel approachable to people. It helps to keep the text simple. This phrase works the best. “Free Listening Here! We are Sidewalk Talk, A Community Listening Project. www.sidewalk-talk.org”
4. **URL / QR CODE**: Here is a simple URL you can send people to when you meet them on the Sidewalk, you can add to your signage, or put a QR code on your sign. If you don’t have a greeter, it is a fast an easy way to answer people’s questions without interrupting your listening.

www.sidewalk-talk.org/questions



Getting Ready to Listen

Set an intention

It is good to huddle up and set an intention for what you want to give to the Sidewalk that day.

Be Listened To

You might take turns listening to one another to start with. People will start getting real curious when they see you there listening to each other. So it is a warm up and it draws other talkers to come on over.

Check Out

After you have packed up your chairs and supplies, you might do a check out huddle. What is one thing you want to keep with you as a gift from your experience? What is one thing you want to leave behind from your experience?