

WHYZMEN • SESSION 10 • GOING DEEPER • LONG-READ, 30 MIN

Listening Well

Tactical empathy, better questions, and conversations that matter

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

— James 1:19

Five teachers from very different worlds arrive at the same place: **curiosity makes people feel safe, and people who feel safe open up**. Chris Voss learned it as the FBI’s lead international hostage negotiator (*Never Split the Difference*). David Brooks found it by studying people who make others feel seen (*How to Know a Person*). Harvard researcher Alison Wood Brooks measured it in thousands of recorded conversations (*Talk*). Charles Duhigg traced it in the people others seek out when something matters (*Supercommunicators*), and Eric Barker gathered the research on what actually holds friendships together (*Plays Well with Others*).

Your **Listening Kit** is built from these tools. These pages give you the reasons behind them and a few more ways to use them: in your triad, at home, and with anyone you want to know better.

The one rule: listen before fixing. When you aren’t sure, ask: *“Do you want help, or just to be heard?”*

1. Show him you heard him — Chris Voss

Voss calls it **tactical empathy**: understanding another person’s feelings and saying them out loud. You don’t have to agree with someone to show him you understand him.

Tool	What you do	Say it like this
Mirror	Repeat his last one to three key words, with a curious, upward tone. Then wait.	“Not feeling needed?”
Label	Name the feeling you sense, gently. Start with “It sounds like” or “It seems like,” never “I know how you feel.”	“It sounds like this has been harder than you expected.”
Pause	After a mirror or label, stop talking. Silence gives him room to go further.	(count to five)
Summarize	Put what he said <i>and</i> what he feels into a sentence or two, until he says “That’s right.”	“So you’re glad to be done, but you miss being the guy people called. That’s what stings.”
Open question	Ask “what” or “how,” not “why” (which can sound like an accusation).	“What’s the hardest part of this for you?”
Name the elephant	Voss calls this an <i>accusation audit</i> : say the awkward thing before he has to.	“You might think I’m about to give you advice. I’m not.”

Listen for “That’s right,” not “You’re right.” “You’re right” often means *please stop talking*. “That’s right” means *you understand me*, and that is the goal.

Duhigg calls the summarize step **looping** and puts it in plain words: say what he said in your own words, ask “Did I get that right?”, then invite more: “Tell me more about that.” The point is not to prove you understood. It is to show you are trying to.

2. Ask better questions — Alison Wood Brooks

Brooks’s research sums up good conversation in four letters, **TALK**:

	What it means	Try this
T • Topics	Pick subjects that open doors. Save the hot-button topics until trust is built.	Swap “What do you do?” for “What’s captured your attention lately?”
A • Asking	Ask more questions, especially follow-ups , which show you were listening.	“Tell me more about that.” “What was that like?”
L • Levity	A little lightness lowers defenses. Laugh <i>with</i> , never <i>at</i> .	Never use humor to dodge someone’s pain.
K • Kindness	Assume the best when something comes out wrong. Give your full attention. Remember what he said.	“Last month you mentioned your brother. How is he?”

In one set of studies (Huang, Brooks and colleagues, 2017), people who asked more questions, and especially more follow-up questions, were liked more by their conversation partners. Most of us ask too few.

3. Know which conversation you’re in — Charles Duhigg

Duhigg’s central finding is that most conversations are one of three kinds, and connection happens when both people are in the same kind at the same time. Many misfires are a man answering a different conversation from the one he is in: she wants empathy, and he offers logistics.

	The question underneath	Meet it with
Practical	“What should we do?”	Ideas and options, once he has asked for them.
Emotional	“How do I feel about this?”	Mirror, label, and silence. No solutions yet.
Social	“Who are we to each other?”	Something of your own: a story, a shared memory, an honest “me too.”

When you can't tell which, ask: **"Are you looking for ideas, or would it help just to talk it through?"** Then read the temperature. If the conversation runs hot, slow down and acknowledge the feeling first; logic bounces off. If it runs cold and awkward, warm it with a small story of your own.

"To answer before listening — that is folly and shame."

— Proverbs 18:13

4. Be an Illuminator — David Brooks

Brooks divides people into **Diminishers**, who make others feel invisible, and **Illuminators**, who make others feel seen. Illuminators do a few simple things:

- **Ask about the story, not the scorecard.** "How did you come to that?" rather than "What did you accomplish?"
- **Ask one big question when the moment is right.** *What crossroads are you at? If the next five years were a chapter in your life, what would it be about?*
- **Don't top his story.** When he shares something, resist "That reminds me of when I..." Stay with *his* story.
- **Don't fear the pause.** The best answers often come after a silence that feels a beat too long.
- **See the story, not the snapshot.** The grumpy man in front of you has a history, hopes and wounds you can't see from here. Judge the moment and you miss the man.
- **Treat him as a mystery, not a puzzle.** A puzzle gets solved and set aside. A person keeps unfolding.

"The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out."

— Proverbs 20:5

5. Celebrate well — Eric Barker

How you answer good news matters as much as how you answer bad. Barker draws on psychologist Shelly Gable's research: people whose partners and friends meet their good news with active, engaged interest report closer and more satisfying relationships. Most men answer with a nod.

- **Passive:** "Oh, that's nice."
- **Active and constructive:** "That's fantastic. What was the best part of it for you?" Then let him tell it again. Savoring a good thing out loud is part of how it lasts.

6. From small talk to big talk

Listening opens the door. Three moves walk you both through it:

- **Build a bridge.** Listen for a word that hints at something deeper, then follow it. "How's retirement?" "Oh, keeping busy." "You said busy. What's been the most meaningful thing keeping you busy?" (Duhigg)
- **Go first with something real.** Someone has to. A small, honest disclosure invites him to match it: "I've been trying to walk more this fall. Turns out I'm much better at setting goals than keeping them. How about you?" Duhigg calls these *bids*; friendships grow when bids are noticed and returned. (Brooks, Barker, Duhigg)

- **Close the loop afterward.** A day or two later, send a note that proves you were listening: “How did your daughter’s interview go? I’ve been thinking about you.” Or bring it back next time: “Last time you mentioned that book on the Civil War. Did you finish it?”

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”

— Simone Weil

None of this needs a personality transplant. It needs a decision, made at the start of each conversation, to be **more interested than interesting**.

7. Putting it together: a triad moment

He says or does	You	The tool
“Retirement’s been... fine.”	“Fine?”	Mirror
“Yeah. I mean, I’ve got plenty to do.”	“It sounds like being busy isn’t quite the same as being needed.”	Label
(long pause) “No. It isn’t.”	(silence)	Pause
“Nobody calls me for anything anymore.”	“What’s the hardest part of that for you?”	Open question
He tells you.	“So you’re not bored. You miss mattering to people.”	Summarize
“That’s right.”	“Do you want help thinking about it, or do you just want us to hear it tonight?”	The one rule

Notice what you didn’t do: no advice, no story of your own, no “at least you...” Three short sentences and a lot of listening.

8. Practice: one skill a week, five minutes a day

Voss’s advice: aim to be consistent, not great. Pick one conversation a day (your wife, a friend, the man at the coffee shop) and practice just one tool.

Week	Practice	Check yourself
1	Mirror and label	Did I name a feeling before I offered a thought?
2	Follow-up questions	Did I ask at least three follow-ups before changing the subject?
3	One big question	Did I ask about a story, a crossroads, or a change?
4	Summarize to “That’s right”	At the triad meeting, did each man hear “That’s right” at least once?

Week	Practice	Check yourself
	A word of caution • These are tools, not tricks. Voss built them for negotiation. Among friends, the goal is understanding, never getting your way. • Mirror and label sparingly. Used every sentence, they sound mechanical. Once or twice in a conversation is plenty. • At home, label to understand your wife, never to diagnose her (“You’re just anxious”). The Marriage Listening Card is your tool there. • With grandchildren and teenagers, the same tools work beautifully. Ask “What was the best part of your week?” instead of “How was school?”, and mirror more than you advise.	

Sources: Chris Voss with Tahl Raz, *Never Split the Difference* (2016), chs. 2–3 • David Brooks, *How to Know a Person* (2023) • Alison Wood Brooks, *Talk: The Science of Conversation and the Art of Being Ourselves* (2025) • Charles Duhigg, *Supercommunicators* (2024) • Eric Barker, *Plays Well with Others* (2022) • Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson & Gino, “It Doesn’t Hurt to Ask: Question-Asking Increases Liking,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2017) • Gable, Reis, Impett & Asher, “What Do You Do When Things Go Right?,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2004) • Simone Weil, letter to Joë Bousquet (1942). This edition merges *The Gift of Being Heard* into *Listening Well*.

Wise Men Seek, Knowing Their Why’s

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