

We Are Losing Our Listening: text from TED talk

We are losing our listening. We spend roughly 60 percent of our communication time listening, but we're not very good at it. We retain just 25 percent of what we hear. Now not you, not this talk, but that is generally true. Let's define listening as making meaning from sound. It's a mental process, and it's a process of extraction.

0:34 We use some pretty cool techniques to do this. One of them is pattern recognition. (Crowd Noise) So in a cocktail party like this, if I say, "David, Sara, pay attention," some of you just sat up. We recognize patterns to distinguish noise from signal, and especially our name. Differencing is another technique we use. If I left this pink noise on for more than a couple of minutes, you would literally cease to hear it. We listen to differences, we discount sounds that remain the same.

1:03 And then there is a whole range of filters. These filters take us from all sound down to what we pay attention to. Most people are entirely unconscious of these filters. But they actually create our reality in a way, because they tell us what we're paying attention to right now. Give you one example of that: Intention is very important in sound, in listening. When I married my wife, I promised her that I would listen to her every day as if for the first time. Now that's something I fall short of on a daily basis. (Laughter) But it's a great intention to have in a relationship.

1:40 But that's not all. Sound places us in space and in time. If you close your eyes right now in this room, you're aware of the size of the room from the reverberation and the bouncing of the sound off the surfaces. And you're aware of how many people are around you because of the micro-noises you're receiving. And sound places us in time as well, because sound always has time embedded in it. In fact, I would suggest that our listening is the main way that we experience the flow of time from past to future. So, "Sonority is time and meaning" -- a great quote.

2:14 I said at the beginning, we're losing our listening. Why did I say that? Well there are a lot of reasons for this. First of all, we invented ways of recording -- first writing, then audio recording and now video recording as well. The premium on accurate and careful listening has simply disappeared. Secondly, the world is now so noisy, (Noise) with this cacophony going on visually and auditorily, it's just hard to listen; it's tiring to listen. Many people take refuge in headphones, but they turn big, public spaces like this, shared soundscapes, into millions of tiny, little personal sound bubbles. In this scenario, nobody's listening to anybody.

2:58 We're becoming impatient. We don't want oratory anymore, we want sound bites. And the art of conversation is being replaced -- dangerously, I think -- by personal broadcasting. I don't know how much listening there is in this conversation, which is sadly very common, especially in the U.K. We're becoming desensitized. Our media have to scream at us with these kinds of headlines in order to get our attention. And that means it's harder for us to pay attention to the quiet, the subtle, the understated.

3:31 This is a serious problem that we're losing our listening. This is not trivial. Because listening is our access to understanding. Conscious listening always creates understanding. And only without conscious listening can these things happen -- a world where we don't listen to each other at all, is a very scary place indeed. So I'd like to share with you five simple exercises, tools you can take away with you, to improve your own conscious listening. Would you like that?

4:03 (Audience: Yes.) Good.

4:05 The first one is silence. Just three minutes a day of silence is a wonderful exercise to reset your ears and to recalibrate so that you can hear the quiet again. If you can't get absolute silence, go for quiet, that's absolutely fine.

4:20 Second, I call this the mixer. (Noise) So even if you're in a noisy environment like this -- and we all spend a lot of time in places like this -- listen in the coffee bar to how many channels of sound can I hear? How many individual channels in that mix am I listening to? You can do it in a beautiful place as well, like in a lake. How many birds am I hearing? Where are they? Where are those ripples? It's a great exercise for improving the quality of your listening.

4:48 Third, this exercise I call savoring, and this is a beautiful exercise. It's about enjoying mundane sounds. This, for example, is my tumble dryer. (Dryer) It's a waltz. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three. I love it. Or just try this one on for size. (Coffee grinder) Wow! So mundane sounds can be really interesting if you pay attention. I call that the hidden choir. It's around us all the time.

5:23 The next exercise is probably the most important of all of these, if you just take one thing away. This is listening positions -- the idea that you can move your listening position to what's appropriate to what you're listening to. This is playing with those filters. Do you remember, I gave you those filters at the beginning. It's starting to play with them as levers, to get conscious about them and to move to different places. These are just some of the listening positions, or scales of listening positions, that you can use. There are many. Have fun with that. It's very exciting.

5:54 And finally, an acronym. You can use this in listening, in communication. If you're in any one of those roles -- and I think that probably is everybody who's listening to this talk -- the acronym is RASA, which is the Sanskrit word for juice or essence. And RASA stands for Receive, which means pay attention to the person; Appreciate, making little noises like "hmm," "oh," "okay"; Summarize, the word "so" is very important in communication; and Ask, ask questions afterward.

6:26 Now sound is my passion, it's my life. I wrote a whole book about it. So I live to listen. That's too much to ask from most people. But I believe that every human being needs to listen consciously in order to live fully -- connected in space and in time to the physical world around us, connected in understanding to each other, not to mention spiritually connected, because every spiritual path I know of has listening and contemplation at its heart.

6:53 That's why we need to teach listening in our schools as a skill. Why is it not taught? It's crazy. And if we can teach listening in our schools, we can take our listening off that slippery slope to that dangerous, scary world that I talked about and move it to a place where everybody is consciously listening all the time -- or at least capable of doing it.

7:15 Now I don't know how to do that, but this is TED, and I think the TED community is capable of anything. So I invite you to connect with me, connect with each other, take this mission out and let's get listening taught in schools, and transform the world in one generation to a conscious listening world -- a world of connection, a world of understanding and a world of peace.

7:36 Thank you for listening to me today.

7:38 (Applause)