N. 2025-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000350227

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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Active listening

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: MEDIA

Module No.06

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ZONTA CLUB OF JELGAVA

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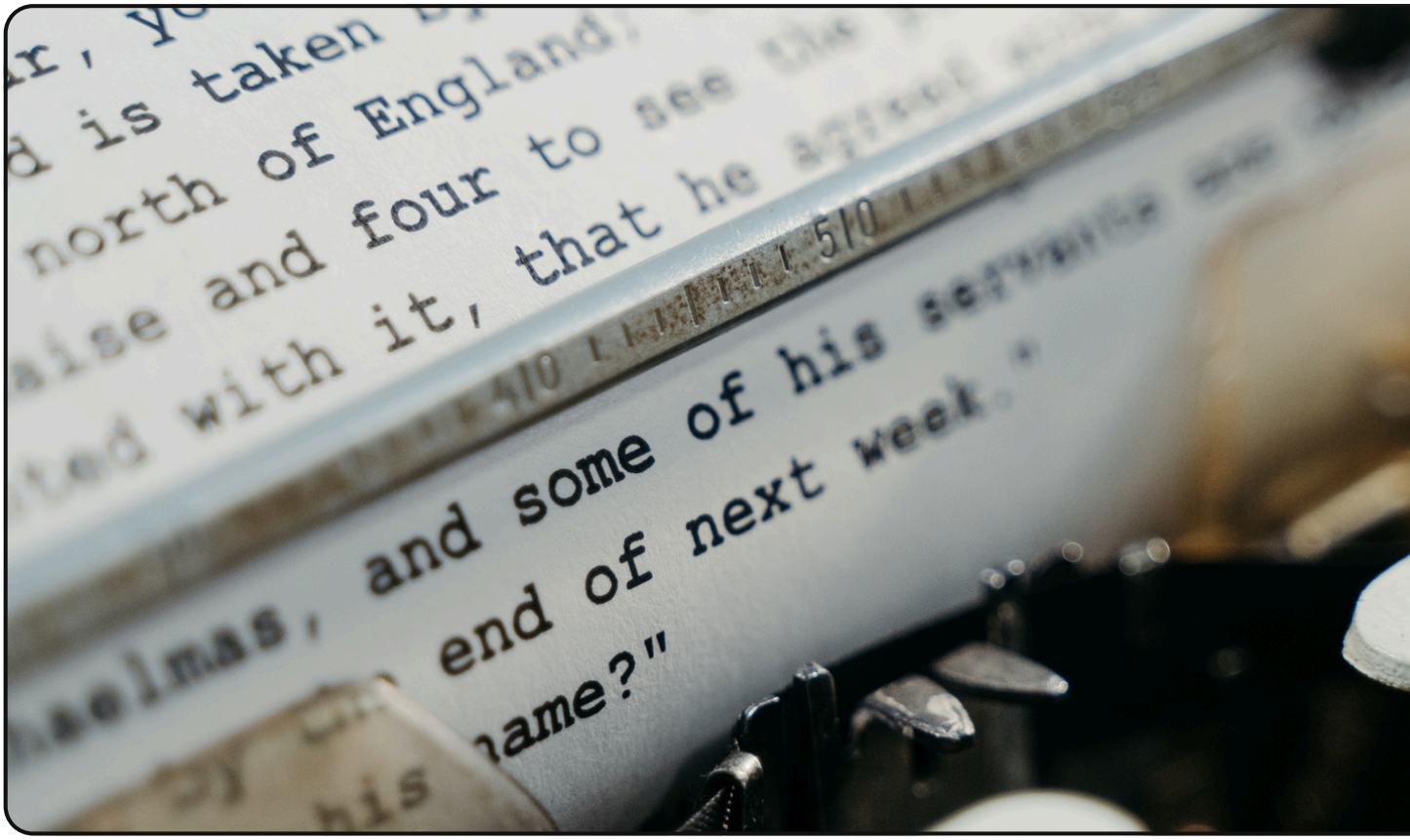

1. Why this subject matter

Active listening is about *listening with intent* — not just hearing the words but also understanding the message behind them. In journalism it is the practice of fully concentrating on, understanding, and responding to a source to build trust, accuracy, and depth in reporting. Active listening methods include using open-ended questions, observing non-verbal cues, and utilizing silence to encourage deeper, more candid responses. It may transform interviews from transactional question-and-answer sessions into, often, more fruitful conversations, allowing journalists to pick up on "crumbs" of information for better follow-up question.

2. Learning Outcomes



By the end of this Module, the learner will be able to:

01

Personal, flexibility – understanding and adopting new ideas, approaches, tools, and actions in response to changing contexts.

02

Social, empathy – understanding another person's emotions and experiences, and the ability to proactively take their perspective.

03

Social, communication – listening to others and engaging in conversations with confidence, assertiveness, clarity and reciprocity, both in personal and social contexts.

3. Definitions

Active listening in journalism is a deliberate technique involving full concentration, understanding, and empathetic engagement to build rapport, ensure accuracy, and uncover deeper narratives. It transforms interviews from transactional question-and-answer sessions into, often, more fruitful conversations, allowing journalists to pick up on "crumbs" of information for better follow-up questions. This allows victims to be thoroughly seen and hear, and generally enhances emotional environment in a community.

Psychological and neurolinguistic mechanisms

Active listening is a sophisticated cognitive and social process that involves more than just hearing words; it is a, "dynamic, intentional, and effortful" way of understanding, "both the content and the underlying emotions" of a message. It requires a, "simultaneous set of actions," including language processing, suppressing the impulse to interrupt, and forming empathetic, responses. Here are things that improve the active listening process:

Listen for total meaning. When someone is conveying a message, there are two meanings to gather: the content and the feeling or attitude underlying the message. An active listener is not only tuned in to the information conveyed, but also how it is conveyed and any nonverbal cues present.

Respond to feelings. After listening, when a response is appropriate, the listener should respond to the feeling of what was said. In this way, the speaker feels understood and empathy is established.

Note all cues. Nonverbal cues include tone of voice, facial or body expressions, and speed of speech. All of these taken together can convey a much deeper meaning than merely the content of what was said.



Gender differences in listening styles

Active listening methods are **universal**; however, research suggests that while both genders can listen equally well, their styles and preferences often differ, leading to potential misunderstandings.

Let`s look at some of the most widespread – men tend to focus on the content more (facts and problem-solving), whereas women are often more attuned to the mood, feelings, and emotional undertones of a conversation. Furthermore – women often use more verbal, supportive feedback (e.g."mm-hmm" "I see") to show engagement, while men may remain silent to show they are listening, which can be misinterpreted by women as lack of interest. Studies indicate cognitive differences as well – men often use one hemisphere of the brain while listening, while women may use both, suggesting different neurological approaches to processing spoken information.

Gender-Based Communication Issues

Thus active listening can be crucial for mitigating specific, documented gendered communication barriers: firstly, women are frequently interrupted more than men in group settings, particularly by men. Secondly, women often experience “mansplaining" or being condescendingly explained, which active listening seeks to address by focusing on respectful dialogue. Voices of women and underrepresented groups are sometimes dismissed or ignored in discussions, which active listening practices aim to correct. Women often have to walk a fine line between being seen as too aggressive or too passive, and active listening can help create a space where this tension is recognized and mitigated.



4. Active listening: typical errors in journalistic practice

In journalistic practice there are several types of errors one may encounter therefore before the interview it is rather important to be aware of them, and employ active listening methods that can help to improve the outcome of the interview.

Error	How to change it?
Limited space	Set up an environment — physical or virtual — where your source feels psychologically safe and inspired to share.
Biased viewpoints	Listen to yourself first: check your own assumptions, and distractions before engaging. Self-awareness is the foundation of listening well and with integrity.
Not being present	Give your full attention. Put away distractions, maintain eye contact, and signal that you are truly there for your source.
Preconceptions	Be curious: approach every interview with genuine curiosity. Be open to learning something new.

Error	How to change it?
Ignorance of non-verbal cues	Hold the gaze, maintaining a warm-hearted eye contact, nodding where it feels natural, open posture, and attentive body language — to show you are engaged. Research shows that positive facial expressions and, what are termed backchannel responses, encourage people to share more deeply.
Filling the silence	Don't rush to fill pauses. Silence gives interviewees space to reflect and often leads to richer responses. Again, your silences are not a cold hard silence but a rich, warm, spacious stillness
Lack of clarity.	Reflect back – summarize the heart of what you've heard, including emotions and underlying messages. Check your understanding and invite clarification. This iterative process helps both you and your source crystallize meaning. Even if you get it wrong, your interviewee can say, "no, not that, but this."
No reflection	Go deeper and explore the underlying narratives, needs, and values that shape your source's perspective through attempting to clarify what your speaker has shared, either in words or through other ways. Your reflections invite them to elaborate on what matters most to them. This is very different from the exchange being driven by what's most interesting to you.

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5. Impact on media narratives on gender-based violence

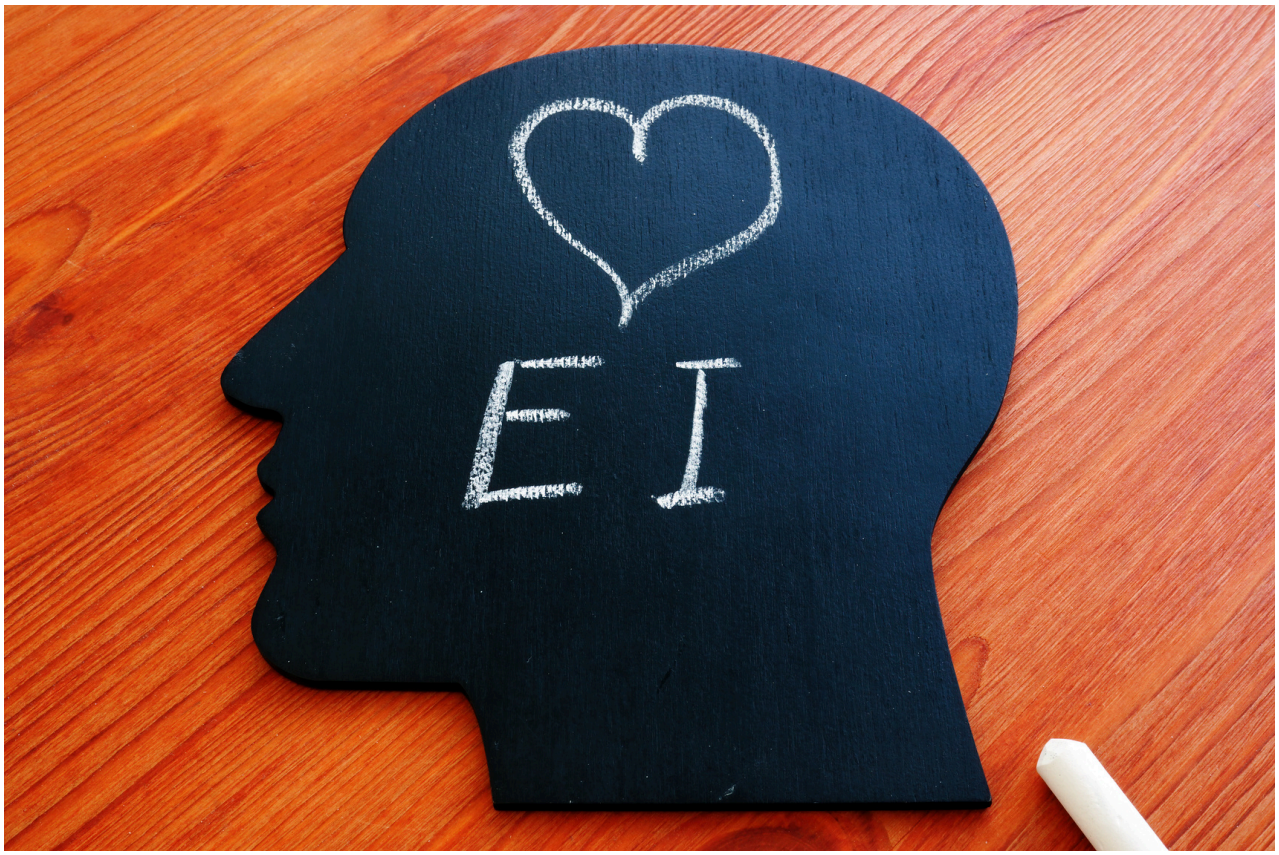


Active listening is a critical tool for **identifying**, **understanding**, and **mitigating** gender-based issues in both personal and professional environments. It involves fully concentrating, understanding, and responding to a speaker, rather than just passively hearing them, which helps to counteract gender biases.

Active listening as a tool for gender equity

There are several typical gender-specific aspects a journalist has to keep in mind. Dismantling bias**:** active listening helps to challenge gender stereotypes, such as the assumption that men are more direct or that women are less competent. Crediting ideas: it involves acknowledging the original contributor of an idea, which is essential for combating "he-peating" (men repeating a woman's idea as their own) and ensuring women receive proper recognition.

Amplifying quieter voices: actively inviting input from those less likely to speak, who are often women or underrepresented groups, ensures that all voices are included in decision-making. Validation: in a professional context, it helps to counter "voice nonrecognition" and "mansplaining" by ensuring that women's contributions are actually heard and valued.



6. Positive Reframing

Read the model interview with a domestic abuse victim and analyze all active listening methods you can notice in every part of the dialogue:

Interviewer (puts away his phone, tablet and computer, shows an attentive body language): "Thank you for agreeing to talk today. I want you to know this is a safe place. We can stop at any time. I'm here to listen."
Victim (speaks with longer pauses): "I don't know where to start... it's so complicated... I think it's my fault, that I provoked them."

Part 1
Interviewer: "You feel guilty about what happened and you think that your actions caused the situation to escalate. That sounds like a very heavy burden to bear."
Victim: "Yeah. They say I talk back too much, but I just want them to hear me."

Part 2
Interviewer: "How did that make you feel at the time when you were trying to explain your feelings to them?"
Victim: "Invisible. Like I don't exist. And then when they start screaming... I just freeze."

Part 3
Interviewer: "If I understand you correctly, in those moments you feel completely ignored, and the fear makes you literally paralyzed. Am I describing your feeling accurately?"
Victim: "That's right. I'd like to run away, but my legs won't move."

Part 4

Interviewer: "It's a completely natural reaction to freeze when you feel threatened. What you're experiencing is very traumatic, and your safety is a priority."

Some of the active listening methods you might notice in this dialogue: Part 1: Reflection and Empathy, Part 2: Open-ended questions, Part 3: Clarification, Part 4: Validation.

Also notice:

Interviewer`s body language: maintaining eye contact (if the person is comfortable with it), leaning slightly forward, avoid crossing arms.

Interviewer does not fill the silence, they let the person think. They don't break the silence immediately.

They focus on victim`s emotions

They use non-judgmental language and avoid questions like "Why didn't you leave?" or "Why did you say that?"



7. Case study

Watch the interview: Houston woman shares her story of domestic violence

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ho4eYVY2gPI

Think of the interviewer`s work in this case?
Is it applying active listening methods?

Go through the list:

- What kind of environment has the interviewer created?
- Is the interviewer biased or impartial?
- Is he giving full attention to the victim?

- Is he expressing a genuine curiosity?
- Is the interviewer using non-verbal cues?
- Is he filling pauses and silence or giving time to the victim?
- Is the interviewer summarizing information to clarify something?
- Is he reflecting on the information?

9. Practical Exercises

01
A great listener

Objective: Revision of active listening skills discussed in the theoretical part

Duration 45 mins

Materials: YouTube video “4 things all great listeners know” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3ku5nx4tMU, true/false task, question task.

Instructions:

- Watch the video “4 things all great listeners know” and find correspondences between active listening theory discussed in the module 6 and facts mentioned in the video.
- Watch the video again and do the True/False task.
- If necessary, watch the video one more time and answer questions about the video.

True/False task, circle the correct answer.

1)To become better listeners we should make the speaker feel understood. ✓/✗

2) Smiling and nodding at set intervals are a basis for a good listening performance. ✓/✗

3) During a conversation you should stay completely silent to show your attentiveness. ✓/✗

4) People who feel heard report more connection, trust and satisfaction in relationship. ✓/✗

5) High-quality listening restrains open-mindedness. ✓/✗

Questions about the video, provide answer from the video.



1) Who has claimed good listening skills as one of the most important things to improve relationships?

2) What are some typical good listening features?

3)What should you remove while having a conversation?

4)What kind of questions benefit the speaker (for example, How did that make you feel)?

5) What kind of theory states when people are pressured to change their mind, they are more likely to defend their point of view?

6) What can start a deeper conversation?

Expected Output: Correspondences – attentiveness, body language indicating understanding, removal of distractions, no interruptions while person is speaking, open-ended questions, summarizing information heard, staying present and asking for repetition and clarification, silence as a space for the speaker to reflect, non-judgmental and psychologically safe environment.

True/False task: 1- T, 2 – F, 3 – F, 4 – T, 5 – F

Answers to questions: 1) Behavioral scientists, 2) Attentiveness, conveying understanding, showing a positive intention towards the speaker, 3) Any distractions such as phones, 4) Open-ended questions, 5) Theory of psychological reactance, 6) Being heard.

Reflection Questions:

- Can everyone become a good listener?
- Apart from the field of journalism, where else could active listening skills be important?
- With the rise of artificial intelligence, do you think that active listening skill will become more crucial or lose their importance?



02
What's wrong?

Objective: recognition of bad victim interviewing and poor active listening skills, correction of wrong methods.
Duration: 1 hour
Materials: interview example, list "Bad victim interviewing"

Instructions:

- Read the interview with an abuse victim and try to notice mistakes journalist has done.
- Under the interview there is a list "Bad victim interviewing", find the mistake examples in the given interview.
- Try to provide correct methods for every mistake the journalist has done.

"In October a local newspaper is participating in National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. It is publishing interviews with anonymous victims from the local community to show abuse can happen everywhere. However, the journalist who has been trained in victim interviewing and knows how to use active listening skills is ill. The newspaper asks another interviewer do the task.

The interview:

Interviewer (*starts the conversation buy putting their phone on the desk):* "Sorry, waiting for an important call today, but let us start, tell me about your experience".

Victim: "When I met my boyfriend, he seemed really into me. He would constantly tell me that I was beautiful and that he loved me.

He made me feel so special. We eventually moved in together and that's when things began to change. He became controlling about what I ate, what I bought, and where we would go. He would take my car so I couldn't get to Uni."

Interviewer: "Why didn't you fight back?".

Victim (feels ashamed of their behavior and struggles to continue): "Well…hum…He would always say sorry afterwards and that he would get counselling, but he never did.

We lived far away from my parents and friends and I wasn't allowed to leave the house…"

Interviewer (interrupting, expressing disbelief with their tone, not looking at the victim): "It sounds quite unlikeable that you as a grown-up, educated person would allow your-self to be home-locked."

Victim: "I felt really trapped and isolated and became really depressed."

Interviewer: "OK, so what happened next?"

Victim: "He eventually allowed me to get a job because he needed money."

Interviewer (in disbelief): "But you just said that he home-trapped you, so how could you find a job?"

Victim (starting to stammer and sound unsure): "Well…this changed at one point, he didn`t have enough money for us both. The job I found had the most amazing staff, and that helped to build up my self-esteem. I realized that there were better people and places out there for me."

Interviewer (becoming impatient): "So while he provided for you everything, you stayed and then you just left him."

Victim: "I wouldn`t explain it that way…"

Interviewer: "But you just did. Your case reminds me of another victim...who also left as soon as abuser (mocking tone) run out of money to provide".

Victim: "I really didn`t mean it to sound as if…I…I realized that, no matter how much I loved him or felt sorry for him, his behavior would never change. Every chance that I gave him became another opportunity for him to hurt me."
Interviewer: "OK, so tell me more about the abuse, provide some examples if possible."
Victim (feeling uncomfortable to relive the memories once again, struggles): "I…hmm…"
Interviewer (checking their phone again): "Sorry, I don`t have the whole day here, please mention some examples of abuse."
Victim: "Yes…of course…Things escalated whenever he took alcohol or drugs. He became physically abusive."
Interviewer: "Be more specific please. What kind of abuse?"
Victim (starting to cry from the heaviness of memories): "Yes…of course…he… he would."
Interviewer (interrupts with impatience): "Sorry for being insensitive but time is really limited, could you please get a hold of yourself and explain in precise details what kind of abuse was it?"
Victim (taking a breath and trying to concentrate): "He would hit, kick, throw, and head-butt me…Sometimes he would beat me up in the car while I was driving...Once he dragged me along our street while his mates watched and laughed."
Interviewer: "Well since you tolerated this kind of behavior in front of his friends most probably, they thought that this is acceptable in your relationship."
Victim: "Staying with a supportive friend and going into counselling helped me gain my strength back."
Interviewer: "So this means that you quickly jumped into another relationship with this "supportive friend" (implying tone)?"
Victim: "No…of course, not…it was my best friend from school. Thanks to her I began to realize that I am a wonderful person.

And, instead of hating myself, I congratulated myself for surviving the terrible experience I had endured. I saw it as a great feat of strength."
Interviewer: "So it sounds it wasn`t so bad after all. You don`t look overly traumatized to me."
Victim (looks confused): "Abuse scars aren`t always seen but they can run down deep in the soul."
Interviewer (untouched and out of phase): "Yes, sure. OK, thank you for the interview, we will contact you for the further details if necessary."

victim`s answers adopted from:

https://safeandequal.org.au/understanding-family-violence/stories/jade/

List "Bad victim interviewing":

Victim-Blaming and Shaming Tactics
Focusing on behavior or attire: Asking questions that suggest the victim caused the assault, such as "Why were you walking alone?" "What were you wearing?" or "Why didn't you fight back?".
Assuming responsibility: Blaming a victim of robbery for not locking doors, or a victim of harassment for not standing up for themselves.
Focusing on "likeability": Dismissing a victim's claims because they are deemed "weird," unlikable, or behaved poorly, regardless of the severity of the abuse.
r chronology: Forcing a distressed victim to tell their story in strict chronological order. Trauma impacts memory, making it common for victims to remember details out of order or in fragments.

Accusing of lying due to inconsistencies: Assuming a victim is lying because their story changes in minor details, rather than understanding that traumatic stress impacts memory recall.
Insensitivity to emotional state: Continuing to push for answers while a victim is crying or having a panic attack, rather than allowing them time to stabilize.

Lack of Trauma-Informed Approach
Demanding linear chronology: Forcing a distressed victim to tell their story in strict chronological order. Trauma impacts memory, making it common for victims to remember details out of order or in fragments.
Accusing of lying due to inconsistencies: Assuming a victim is lying because their story changes in minor details, rather than understanding that traumatic stress impacts memory recall.
Insensitivity to emotional state: Continuing to push for answers while a victim is crying or having a panic attack, rather than allowing them time to stabilize.

Suggestive and Leading Questioning
Introducing new information: The interviewer introduces details that the victim never mentioned, such as, "Did he touch you on the bottom?" when the victim only said they were assaulted.
Reinforcing specific answers: Influencing the victim to confirm a narrative that fits the interviewer's preconceived ideas.

Inappropriate Communication Responses
Using clichés: Saying things like "I know how you feel," "Why didn't you...?", or "It could be worse".
Dismissive language: "It's God's will," "Move on," or "You should forgive".
Comparing cases: Telling a victim, "Your case reminds me of another victim..."

Expected Output: mistakes in the interview, in the order as they appear in the text:
1) unsafe space (limited time, hurry, a phone as a distractor),
2) victim blaming and shaming – focusing on the behavior of the victim,
3) interruptions to give biased, judgmental comments,
4) no eye contact or other helpful body cues,
5) dismissing victim`s claims,
6) accusing of inconsistencies in the victims story,
7) showing assumptions based on the interviewer`s personal biases,
8) inappropriate communication responses – comparing cases,
9) demanding attitude and insensitivity to the emotional state of the victim,
10) lack of pauses for the victim,
11) reinforcing specific answers to fit the interviewer`s biased opinions,
12) inappropriate communication responses – using clichés and dismissing language,
13) no reflection.

Reflection Questions:

- Imagine that you have to do this kind of task – victim interviewing – would you agree?
- Have you ever had a similar experience – taking an interview with an abuse victim?
- What are the appropriate preparatory steps for this kind of interview?
- How are active listening skills helping to interview abuse victims?
- How are this kind of interviews (conducted appropriately) helping a local community and society in general?



03
Active listening in practice

Objective: interview with an abuse victim, employing active listening skills.
Duration: 1.5 h
Materials: survivor's story

Instructions:

1. Divide into pairs. Read the story about the family violence shared by Bec.
2. Imagine you have to create a role play – interview in which one person is a journalist using active listening skills and another person is Bec (taking bits of answers from her story)
3. Create an example interview with at least 10 questions.
4. Check the list – are all the active listening elements included in your interview?
5. If necessary, return back to the exercise 2 "What`s wrong" and check whether your interview hasn`t got mistakes mentioned in the list "Bad victim interviewing".
6. Present your interview to your group members or your education instructors.



List “Active listening skills”

Space	You have created a safe space for the speaker to give an interview.
Self-awareness	Do you have any assumptions on this topic, are your questions non-biased?
Being present	How do you show your interviewee that you are listening carefully – verbal and non-verbal cues.
Curiosity	What are you learning from this interview as a professional? How can this experience be used in your further work?
Pauses	Be patient and allow the victim take their time to speak and open up.
Reflection	Summarize what you have heard to gain more clarity and expand/deepen the information received.
Underlaying narratives	Explore speakers needs and values by clarifying things they have said, try to get what is the most important for them.



Expected Output: an exemplary interview taking into consideration active listening skills and common mistakes in victim interviewing.

Reflection Questions:

- Is it easy/difficult to include all the active listening skills in an interview on a sensitive topic?
- How to use gained skills and information in your further practice?
- Why is it important to include active listening skills in the interviews on topics such as abuse/ violence?

Extra tool: Active listening flash cards

Printable form (print out, cut row by row and glue together so that question stays one side but answer on the other)
Use them for activities – answering to the question or guessing the term from the description.



What is **active listening?**	A communication technique that requires the listener to fully concentrate, understand, respond, and then remember what is being said. It's a key skill in building rapport and trust.
What are the **key components** of active listening?	Paying attention, showing that you're listening, providing feedback, deferring judgment, and responding appropriately.
How do you '**pay attention**' in active listening?	By facing the speaker, making eye contact, minimizing distractions, and focusing on the speaker's verbal and non-verbal cues.
What are some ways to '**show that you're listening**'?	Use non-verbal cues like nodding and smiling, and verbal cues like 'yes' or 'I understand' to show you are engaged.
Why is **providing feedback** important in active listening?	It clarifies understanding and confirms that you are accurately interpreting the speaker's message. This can involve paraphrasing or asking clarifying questions.
What does '**deferring judgment**' mean in the context of active listening?	It means avoiding interruptions, criticism, or premature advice. It allows the speaker to fully express their thoughts and feelings without feeling judged.
What constitutes an '**appropriate response**' in active listening?	This response is thoughtful, relevant, and empathetic. It shows that you have not only heard the speaker but also understood their perspective.

What are the **benefits** of active listening in professional settings?	They include improved communication, stronger team collaboration, better problem-solving, increased employee engagement, and enhanced customer relationships.
How can active listening **improve personal relationships**?	It fosters deeper understanding, empathy, and trust, leading to stronger connections and reduced conflict.
What are some **common barriers** to active listening?	They include distractions, prejudgments, planning your response while the speaker is talking, and focusing on your own thoughts and feelings.
How can you **overcome distractions** during active listening?	Minimize external noise, put away your phone, and find a quiet environment. If internal thoughts are distracting, acknowledge them and gently redirect your focus back to the speaker.
What is the **difference** between hearing and active listening?	Hearing is simply perceiving sound, while active listening involves consciously processing, understanding, and responding to the message being conveyed.
How does **emotional intelligence relate** to active listening?	It enhances active listening by enabling you to recognize and understand the speaker's emotions, allowing for a more empathetic and appropriate response.

What are some phrases that **demonstrate** active listening?	Examples include: 'So, you're saying...', 'If I understand correctly...', 'It sounds like you feel...', and 'Tell me more about...'.
How can **non-verbal cues** impact active listening?	Non-verbal cues like posture, facial expressions, and gestures can significantly impact the speaker's perception of your attentiveness and understanding. Maintain open and engaged body language.

Checklist time!

Use this checklist before and during an interview with a survivor or a sensitive source to ensure you are creating a psychologically safe environment and applying active listening techniques.

Preparation & Environment

- Have I set up a physical or virtual environment where the source feels psychologically safe and unhurried?
- Have I consciously put away my phone, laptop, or other distractions to ensure I can give my full, undivided attention?
- Have I checked my own assumptions and biases before starting the conversation?

During the Conversation

- Am I using open-ended questions (e.g., "How did that make you feel?") rather than leading or yes/no questions?
- Am I allowing for natural silences and pauses, resisting the journalistic urge to immediately "fill the gap" when the source stops talking?
- Am I paying close attention to non-verbal cues (tone of voice, body language, facial expressions) as much as to the spoken words?
- Am I summarizing and reflecting back what I have heard (e.g., "If I understand correctly, you felt..") to check my understanding and validate their experience?
- Have I successfully suppressed the impulse to interrupt, even if I have a pressing follow-up question?

Resources

- 1) LifeComp: The European framework for the personal, social and learning to learn key competence, available: https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/lifecomp_en
- 2) A Crash Course in Listening for Journalists, available: https://jcstearns.medium.com/a-crash-course-in-listening-for-journalists-4c8da1799d9a
- 3) How to Practice Active Listening: 16 Examples & Techniques, available: https://positivepsychology.com/active-listening-techniques/
- 4) 20 Unconscious Bias Examples at Work + How to Fix Them, available: https://asana.com/resources/unconscious-bias-examples
- 5) Extended interview: Houston woman shares her story of domestic violence, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ho4eYVY2gPI
- 6) 4 things all great listeners know, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3ku5nx4tMU
- 7) Stories from survivors, Jade`s story, available https://safeandequal.org.au/understanding-family-violence/stories/jade/
- 8) Stories from survivors, Bec`s story, available: https://safeandequal.org.au/understanding-family-violence/stories/becs-story/
- 9)Tool 3, Interviewing victims of gender-based violence, available: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/womens-hr-gender/tool-3-interviewing-digital.pdf#:~:text=Ad%2D%20ditionally%2C%20trauma%20has%20an%20impact%20on,to%20obtain%20details%20or%20chrono%2D%20logical%20sequences.
- 10) How sexual abuse interviews go astray, available: https://icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/How-Sexual-Abuse-Interviews-Go-Astray-Wood-2000.pdf

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© May 2026 – Skill Up Srl, Hochschule Wismar, INDEPCIE sca, Innovation Frontiers IKE, Latvian Zonta E-klubs, Novi Sad School of Journalism.
This publication was carried out with the financial support of the European Commission under Erasmus + Project "MEDUSA-Rewriting media narratives on gender-based violence", N. 2025-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000350227.

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