Some time ago, I met a couple having severe marital problems. When they came in for counseling, the wife described everything in detail, but the husband said nothing. I tried to get him to talk, but he was sullen and answered every question with only one or two words. His wife always jumped in to give more complete answers.

Finally, I invited her to leave the room, then spoke with him alone. At first, he said very little. But when he found that I gave him time to formulate his answers and that I didn’t interrupt, criticize, or judge him, he began to speak freely.

From that point on, I said little. As the interview drew to a close, he seemed relieved. With real feeling he said, “Thanks for listening to me. I have wanted to tell my wife these things for years, but she never wants to hear what I have to say.”

The man had a difficult time formulating and expressing his thoughts, but he showed deep feeling. And he was clearly relieved to finally be able to put those feelings into words. Fortunately, this couple was able to rediscover that they loved each other dearly. Both wanted to build a strong, supportive marriage, and both wanted to do their part.

How tragic it is when listening breaks down to the point where a person gives up trying to be heard! I remember a particularly chaotic family gathering when I was a boy. My brother tried several times to say something but was always interrupted. Finally, he said quietly, “Well, I guess what I wanted to say wasn’t very important anyway.” That simple, quiet statement stopped all conversation, and my brother finally had the undivided attention of the entire family.

Listening is a skill. Let’s look at some barriers to effective listening and at some techniques that can enhance it.

**Barriers to Listening**

- **Being judgmental**: The fastest way to stop a person from talking, especially about painful and difficult subjects, is to criticize him. Suppose, for example, that a man tells his wife, “My boss was on my back all day long! I don’t know what his problem was, but I wish he wouldn’t take it out on me!”

Her response might be: “I wish you’d learn to stand up to him. Why don’t you say something to him when he treats you like that?”
Instead of hearing what he was saying and empathizing with his feelings, she is expressing a judgment: if he had acted differently, he could have avoided the problem. When he senses that she is judging him, he may react with a rapid, angry, or harsh counter-judgment.

A better response would be: “Oh, that sounds just awful! You must really feel frustrated.” Here, the wife is acknowledging her husband’s feelings without accusing him.

- **Confusing understanding with agreement:** Understanding what someone is saying doesn’t mean that you agree with him. Whether you agree is not the issue in the listening process.

Suppose, for example, that your spouse says to you, “It really embarrasses me when you kiss me in public.” If your answer is “That’s no reason to be embarrassed,” you are insensitive to her real message and failing to understand how she is feeling. Such an answer can trigger frustration and possibly hostility; it certainly doesn’t lead to open communication.

A response like “Really? Why?” might be better. Instead of voicing disagreement, you are showing that you have understood her message—and you are opening the door for further discussion.

- **Confusing listening with discussing:** Listening is a one-way process; it involves hearing and understanding a message that another person is conveying. Discussing, on the other hand, is a two-way interchange of ideas. While discussion involves listening skills, the art of listening is important in its own right and must sometimes be used alone.

Effective listening requires full attention, rather than the rapid switching between listening and talking that is involved in discussion. This rapid switching can preclude the more intensive, careful listening that allows a person to reveal his feelings.

The husband in our opening example clearly needed someone to listen to him, not someone with whom to discuss his problem. When a person is frustrated by not being heard, the remedy is for someone to listen, not to talk.

- **Confusing listening with problem-solving:** To listen is to understand, not to propose solutions. Helping to find solutions might be a next step, but it is not part of the listening process. In fact, it may even interfere with helpful listening.

A woman came home from sacrament meeting, sighed deeply, and said to her husband, “I think I’m losing my testimony. I wasn’t filled or uplifted at all today.”

A natural reaction would be to attempt to solve the problem by immediately giving advice. But if you move too fast from listening into proposing solutions, you are skipping over the chance to really understand your spouse’s feelings. And you may seem insensitive—or even smug and self-righteous. Problem-solving comes after real listening and understanding have taken place.

In this case, the husband responded, “Losing your testimony? What makes you feel that way?” He showed that he cared, and he gave his wife a chance to probe her feelings more deeply.

- **Indulging the need to correct errors:** When people are expressing strong feelings, they often ex-
gerate or overstate the facts—sometimes in anger and with accusations. As we listen, we need to concentrate on hearing the message, rather than on correcting the facts.

Once a husband said to me, “I don’t see why my wife has to phone her mother three or four times every day.”

His wife stiffened and retorted, “That’s ridiculous! I’ve never phoned my mother four times in the same day.”

He countered, “Are you kidding! I can remember at least two days when you called her five times.”

They began to argue over how many times a day she phoned her mother. While that battle raged, they ignored the real issue—the husband’s feeling that his wife’s relationship with her mother was interfering with their marital relationship.

Some people believe that all they need to do is get the other person to understand the facts. But when strong emotions are involved, the facts are often not the issue. Being too eager to correct errors and clarify facts may interfere with understanding.

- **Blocking**: It’s easy to misunderstand a message when we really don’t want to hear it. No matter how clearly it is stated, we can reject, reinterpret, or fail to comprehend an unpleasant message. For example, when my teenage daughter wants to borrow my car, she understands “yes” very easily, but “no” seems to lead to utter confusion—and to a thousand questions!

When we as listeners have already made up our minds about something, we may block out messages that do not fit our expectations. Disappointment, anxiety, fear, or other negative emotions can also block out even the clearest messages. Instead of projecting our feelings onto what someone is telling us, we need to concentrate on hearing the speaker’s feelings.

We’ve just looked at six of the most frequent and troublesome “don’ts” to effective listening. Now let’s look at some “do’s”:

**Listening Techniques**

- **Showing genuine caring**: When we are discussing trivial or general topics—like the weather or sports—it’s not so important to show a great deal of concern. But as topics get more emotional, painful, or potentially threatening, a genuine caring attitude becomes more important. Few people will share their inner thoughts or emotions unless they feel that the listener cares about them. Curiosity, badgering, threats, and use of authority are all poor substitutes for honest caring.

- **Commenting occasionally**: Give brief summary statements once in a while as you listen. This assures the person that you’re hearing and comprehending his message and allows him to correct misperceptions.

Once, during a counseling session, a wife shared some deep personal feelings, and her husband sat nodding his head occasionally but saying nothing. When she finished, I felt they had shared an in-
timate moment and had drawn closer. As they were leaving, the husband asked if he could use part of our next meeting to talk to me alone. With her permission, I agreed. The next time they came, he said to me privately, “I wanted to come in alone because last time I didn’t get much of a chance to talk, and I have a lot of things on my mind.”

Instead of sharing an intimate moment with his wife, this man had felt irritated that she had dominated the conversation. In the process, he had missed the entire conversation! Making an occasional summary statement or a comment about what the other person has expressed can help avoid that type of misconnection.

- **Reading nonverbal messages**: Only about 30 percent of our communication is verbal; the rest is nonverbal. In other words, most of the messages we convey to others are communicated by facial expression, body language, voice inflections, positioning, and other nonverbal means. Even a simple phrase like “How about that!” can express disgust, anger, humor, surprise, or interest by the way it is said.

According to studies, women generally tend to have greater natural facility for picking up nuances of nonverbal messages than men. This fact sometimes contributes to faulty communication between the sexes. A man may have to work harder than a woman to pick up nonverbal signals, and a woman may have to be more tolerant of a man’s lack of sensitivity in this area.

- **Listening for feelings**: As noted earlier, people often talk about facts when the real issue has to do with feelings. Often the context, not the words, conveys the real feeling. For example, the statement “The sun is shining” is short and factual. If said after a devastating storm that has caused flooding, injury, and death, the emotional message is more dramatic and significant than the factual one.

People often express powerful emotions indirectly or imprecisely. The context of the discussion often conveys feelings and emotion beyond the meaning of the words.

- **Setting aside your own emotional reaction**: Sometimes, what a person says to you will have great emotional impact on you. To listen successfully, you must set aside your own emotional reactions and concentrate on comprehending his message.

Suppose, for example, that your spouse said, “Your brother has really done it this time. I never want to see him again!”

You may feel immediately defensive, but to express that reaction could end the chance to understand each other and, instead, start an argument. Set aside your own emotions and say: “You really sound upset! What happened?” In this way, you’re acknowledging your spouse’s emotions and opening the way for further explanation. You may need to handle your feelings later—after you really understand the issues involved.

Listening is basic to all relationships. The better listening skills we have, the better equipped we are to develop healthy, fulfilling relationships.

The Lord urges us to “be still and know that I am God.” (D&C 101:16.) This suggests that we cannot understand God or hear whatever message he might have for us if we are unwilling to be still and
listen. By implication, we cannot understand anyone else or hear what they have to say unless we are willing to set aside our own concerns, postpone trying to convey messages, be still, and listen.

Larry K. Langlois, “When Couples Don’t Listen to Each Other,” Ensign, Sept. 1989, 16