

Why Exact Listening?

[The following is a transcript of an audio recording by Carl Johnsen, author of the Exact Listening manual. The recording is available from any Certified Trainer and downloadable as a sound file at <http://www.exactlistening.org>. ©2002 by E.L.T.A.]

Exact Listening is an exercise that helps us become better listeners. It does this by heightening our ability to concentrate, to focus, to really pay attention. This helps sharpen our minds generally, improving not only memory but our ability to perform any activity requiring a focused mind. Exact Listening is not a collection of tricks to help you remember a list of items, so you can go grocery shopping without bringing along a list, for example. Some of those techniques for performing mental feats are very good and can be very useful at times, but that's not what we're doing here.

Just as exercising your body makes you physically stronger and more capable, Exact Listening makes you mentally stronger and more capable on an everyday basis. It's not a technique you use only while listening to someone at home or at the office. It's an exercise that increases your ability to listen and to concentrate day in and day out, not only when you're practicing the technique.

Most of us think of ourselves as good listeners. It's other people (we feel) who don't pay attention. The truth is, very few of us listen as well as we could. Most of the time we perceive only general intentions. We don't really pay attention to exactly what other people are saying.

The first and most crucial step to becoming better listeners is to improve our ability to focus our minds. If we're easily distracted, whether by circumstances in our immediate environment or by our own internal mental and emotional machinery, we're going to miss at least some of what is being communicated. First and foremost, this exercise helps us develop the ability to concentrate, to give our absolute, undivided attention to exactly what someone else is saying.

There are many practical benefits for the skill developed in this exercise. That we listen to each other better is simply the most obvious. Better listening does wonders for human relationships because when you really listen to other people, they know it. They feel closer, more connected to you because they can sense, even if not consciously, that you are really paying attention to what they're saying. Additionally, when we really listen, we lessen the possibility of disagreements and other problems later on.

Subconscious Distraction

A key point to remember is that we are often distracted without our being consciously aware of it. We think we're paying 100% attention to the person speaking to us, catching every detail, but we're not. We often miss some of what is said without realizing it, then subconsciously fill in the blanks. This leads us to assume that we have heard exactly what was said when what was really communicated was at least slightly (and sometimes significantly) different.

Sometimes it's easy to spot when someone is distracted. It's obvious he is thinking about something else while he's listening to you. The truth is, all of us have our "mental machinery" operating all day long. A certain amount of our attention is focused on what we feel is incomplete, for example. This could be whatever we have to do later that day, a problem with the kids or with work—anything. Our minds are frequently churning on these "incomplete cycles" even when we don't realize it. That means we have less attention on what is happening right in front of us, right now.

Although this is an inefficient way to operate, it rarely does us any real harm. Most of us are reasonably alert, meaning we can get along in life and get where we're going without crashing into things (most of the

time). Most of us are so used to driving a car, for example, that we can think about other things while driving, leaving just enough of our attention on the road to operate the vehicle safely. As long as we don't get too distracted, we can usually react to an unforeseen circumstance, instantly suspending other thought to put our total attention on the road and on maneuvering the vehicle away from danger.

This is how we operate in life most of the time, including those times when we're listening to other people. Only some of our attention is on what is going on around us. The rest is on whatever is happening *inside* us at the time. Usually, it is only when something forcibly grabs our attention from the outside that we suspend all other thought and put our total focus on what is going on here and now. Most of the time, our inner machinery is so active that we don't have enough of our attention on our immediate environment to perceive it thoroughly.

In Exact Listening, we learn to take conscious control of our attention, rather than operate on "automatic pilot" or depend on the outside world to direct our attention for us. Because of the nature of the exercise, the most immediate benefit is that we hear much more of what people are saying. There are, however, many other advantages to taking conscious control of our attention.

One additional benefit is that we are more likely to notice when something does distract us. When we're aware that we haven't listened as precisely as we could have, we can take steps to get a communication repeated or clarified. If we are not even aware that we've missed something, we can't do anything about it. You can't correct a problem that you don't even know exists.

While all people will receive benefit from practicing this exercise, there are a number of specific groups for whom Exact Listening will be especially valuable. Before going into this, I want to summarize the exercise itself.

Guide and Student

Exact Listening is remarkably simple. The exercise is done with two people. One person (called a "guide") reads a few words from a book or magazine to another person. This second person (the "student") is then expected to repeat those words back to the guide exactly, word for word.

If the student repeats the words correctly, the guide goes on to another string of words. If the student doesn't get the words exactly right, the guide reads those exact words again, and the student gives it another try. This is done as many times as necessary for the student to repeat the guide's words exactly, word for word, without any addition, deletion, or other alteration. When the student has been successful, the guide goes on to a new group of words.

The guide starts with just a few words, only half a dozen, maybe even fewer. As the student becomes adept at repeating that number of words correctly on the first try, the guide increases the number of words very gradually. Eventually, the student can repeat a very long string of words without a single mistake, a string far longer than when he first started.

It is very important that the guide follow this gradient approach. A "gradient" is a series of steps, each one easily attainable, that accomplishes what would otherwise be a difficult or impossible objective.

The easiest way to illustrate this is to imagine standing at the foot of a flight of stairs. There are ten steps, each one a foot wide and a foot high. Once you've climbed the steps, you are standing ten feet higher and ten feet further forward than you were when you started. If you have full use of your legs and are in even reasonable health, this is an easy task. You probably climb such a flight of stairs at least once a day.

But now imagine there are no stairs between you and the platform that is ten feet away and ten feet in the air. How easy is it now? There isn't a human being on earth who can jump, unassisted, ten feet forward and ten feet in the air. Not even close. It is utterly impossible.

Put back the stairs, and it's not only possible, it's easy—because each individual step is easily attainable.

A gradient is like a flight of stairs. It is a systematic approach to accomplishing a goal through a series of individually easy steps.

The more you exercise a muscle in your body, the stronger it becomes and the more you can do with it. Exercising our mental ability is no different. In order to perform this simple exercise, the student must

give his total attention to the guide, if only for a brief period of time. As the number of words is gradually increased, however, the amount of unbroken time he must stay in that state of total concentration also increases. This develops not only our ability to concentrate and pay attention but our ability to *maintain* concentration and attention for extended periods of time, still grasping exactly what is being communicated, down to the smallest detail. If the student allows himself to be distracted or otherwise allows a single stray thought to creep into his mind, the string of words will go right out of his head. Concentration must be absolute for however long it takes for the guide to read and the student to repeat the words.

You may be thinking that parroting a long string of words has nothing whatsoever to do with a level of communication or deeper connection between people. Real communication, after all, is something far beyond words. That's true, but in order to really listen to exactly what someone says, you have to be paying strict attention, and it is that extra attention that often makes the difference, that encourages connection—on every level—between you and another person.

Furthermore, when you are totally focused on listening to exactly what someone is saying, you are far more likely to perceive the nuances behind the words, the intangibles that ride along with what is being said. These may include emotions or additional meanings. Human beings frequently avoid communicating exactly what they mean. The higher our degree of attention, the more we perceive the subtleties.

It is the focus, the increased attention and desire to perceive exactly what is going on, that opens the door to a deeper connection with another person. Listening to and repeating exact words is simply the vehicle we're using to develop that attention.

As you can see, this exercise is remarkably easy. One person reads some words to another person who repeats those words. If the student gets it wrong, they do it until he gets it right, and then they go on to new words. How simple can it get? This exercise is so simple, in fact, you may well be wondering, "Why should I take a class? Or even read a book? This sounds easy enough. Anybody can do it."

That is absolutely true, and if you just sat down and did this with another person, over a period of time you would see an improvement in your ability to listen and pay attention. In this manual, however, you'll learn a precise structure for doing the exercise that, when followed, significantly accelerates progress. The class additionally affords you the opportunity to learn this structure correctly and get in a few hours of initial practice under the guidance of someone who is experienced and who has been certified to teach the exercise.

Business

Earlier, I mentioned that certain groups of people will find this exercise especially beneficial. The first of these includes anyone who has anything to do with business.

Ask anyone who has to manage other people in business how much time and productivity is lost because people just don't pay attention or don't accurately perceive instructions. I've yet to have one business owner or manager not respond very strongly to this question. They will tell you that an enormous amount of time and productivity, which in business translates as money, is lost because people don't fully grasp instructions exactly as they are given. It is a common occurrence in almost all types of business. Sometimes the misunderstanding is minor, but it affects performance nonetheless. Sometimes a wrong action is taken altogether. When people are trained to listen to exactly what someone says, they are more likely to get the instructions right and do a better job.

Whatever your position or function within a company, you'll be able to do your job better when you listen to precisely what other people are saying, not only with regard to instructions but any type of communication. Just as on a personal level, this goes beyond listening to the exact words. Now you're paying more attention rather than allowing yourself to become distracted, perhaps without even realizing it. That extra attention means you get all of what someone is saying as opposed to getting only part of it.

Even if it is not absolutely necessary that a person remember every single word spoken to him, that extra bit of attention can be the difference between getting something right and getting it not quite right. Training employees in Exact Listening can go a long way toward increasing efficiency and productivity.

Children

Students, especially younger students, benefit from this training by learning how to listen more closely in and out of class. They will also benefit by being able to focus their minds on one thing for a given period of time. Children, especially younger children, are easily distracted. This can affect their school work. In the case of very young children or children who have a really hard time concentrating, you may have to start with very short training sessions. You may also have to stay on a very small number of words for a longer period of time, perhaps even several sessions. In these cases, progress may be gradual, but ultimately remarkable.

You might think some children are just too young to do something like Exact Listening. One of our Trainers works with her four-year-old daughter who loves the exercise. With very young children, it should be approached as a game. Most children are accustomed to games having a certain structure. Exact Listening is easy and uncomplicated. As long as the child looks at it as fun and not work, there is no problem. This four-year-old actually asks her mother to do the exercise. She calls it "the reading game." Her mother has noticed a significant improvement in the little girl's ability to retain information and her ability to spell.

Exact Listening has an incentive program for younger students. When a student can consistently repeat a certain number of words without mistakes, the *Exact Listening Trainers Association* will send the student a certificate recognizing his or her achievement. When the student reaches another level of skill, meaning a higher number of words, he or she can have an updated certificate reflecting the new level of achievement. Parents and teachers may contact any Certified Trainer for details.

Middle Age and Older

Another group that will benefit greatly from Exact Listening is older people. Many people start having problems remembering things as they get to middle-age and older, particularly more recent events, those requiring the use of short-term memory. Some older people find their minds just aren't as sharp or as focused as they used to be. They find it is now more difficult to pay attention or to grasp all of the meaning of what is being communicated.

In most cases, this does not have to happen. A recent broadcast of the news program *20/20* addressed the issue of short-term memory loss, what causes it, and what to do about it. They talked about the part of the brain that is responsible for short-term memory. When this part of the brain shrinks, which tends to happen as we get older, our short-term memory can be affected. It was interesting to note in the studies they did with primates that stress also causes this part of the brain to shrink and thus brings about a reduction in mental capability.

In the *20/20* program, reporter Hugh Downs asked a doctor, an expert in the field of short-term memory loss, what we can do about it. The answer was simple: use it or lose it.

According to this report, you can prevent short-term memory loss from happening and even reverse it by occupying your mind with challenging mental exercises. Exact Listening certainly qualifies. It can be incredibly easy or highly challenging, depending largely on the number of words read by the guide. It's as challenging as it needs to be for you at the time. By starting with a few words, then gradually adding words, ability improves and the exercise remains challenging. I've worked with a number of older people on this exercise, and it is remarkable how they brighten up after doing it, usually after only a short period of time. They seem more "present" and focused.

We tend to think that it is age that brings about a sluggishness in mental functioning. In some cases, this may well be the result of an age-related disease, but it is usually just atrophy. Just as the muscles of the body will become weak if not regularly and vigorously used, so does our ability to concentrate and focus our minds. If we don't exercise our mental muscles for years or even decades, we shouldn't be surprised if they become slow and weak. Fortunately, as the doctor on *20/20* pointed out, this is in most cases reversible.

Restoring Calm

People in business, students, and older people are the three largest groups that can receive extra benefit

from Exact Listening, but these are not the only specialized uses of the exercise.

When an individual is nervous, distracted, or in a state of emotional turmoil, putting his attention on something in the "here/now" tends to have a calming effect. Just as some of our attention is often focused on whatever we feel is incomplete in our lives at the moment, our attention can also be usurped by whatever we feel is wrong in our lives, what we're afraid of, what we're angry about, and so on.

Because Exact Listening requires 100% of the student's attention, his attention cannot be on his past, on his incomplete cycles, or on anything he feels should be different than the way it is. He cannot be in anything but "present time." He has to become calmer and more centered just to do the exercise.

You might think it would be impossible for a person in a nervous, distracted, or emotionally volatile state to do Exact Listening. Although an individual in such a state may find it difficult to repeat a long string of words, he is not incapable of doing the exercise altogether. The guide simply starts the training session with a very small number of words. No matter how nervous or distracted someone is, he can usually focus on two or three words and repeat them exactly. This action alone, repeated a few times, tends to calm and focus the mind. At that point, the guide can go on to four or five words. Then six or seven. And so on.

These individuals will likely see an improvement in their overall state of mind in a relatively short period of time. Continued practice stabilizes this change in everyday life. The individual becomes more centered generally, less likely to be thrown off his emotional balance.

Learning the Exercise

Most people think of communication as expressing their thoughts and feelings to others. Many of us forget, however, that communication is a two-way street. For real communication to exist, we have to perceive the communications of others accurately. This starts with the willingness and ability to really listen.

Exact Listening is so simple that it can be learned from this manual alone. All you need is a partner, some reading material, and a quiet place where you won't be interrupted for an extended period of time. We strongly urge you to take the class, however, if it is available in your area. You will learn the exercise more quickly and make faster progress in your initial training sessions when you're working in a group under the supervision of a Certified Trainer. The more precisely you learn to practice the exercise at the very beginning, the more likely you are to continue practicing and receive the full benefit of the exercise.

Taking the class also puts you in contact with other people with whom you can practice. Furthermore, once you have taken the Exact Listening class one time, you can repeat it as often as you like anywhere it is taught in the world, free of charge.