

Story by  
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# on the NOW

Did you ever call a friend, and end the conversation feeling like you'd only been talking to yourself?

*"If you're one of those people who talks a lot, people grow tired of listening to you."*

Or, when somebody begins a talk with you, do you nod in agreement but find yourself thinking about every other subject under the sun?

Teens interviewed for this story agreed that good listeners are a pleasure, but are sometimes hard to come by.

Rebecca Brotzman and Monica

Duncan, for instance, said they frequently feel they're not being listened to during phone calls — thanks, in many cases, to the television set.

"I can tell when the TV is on just from the way my boyfriend is talking to me. I'll say, 'Are you watching TV? Don't do that, I'm talking to you!'" said Rebecca, 17, a parishioner at Church of the Resurrection in Perinton.

Or, Rebecca said sometimes she might say something to a friend over the phone and

be greeted by "a long silence after I finish. Then they'll say, 'Hold on, I have to see this one thing (on TV).'"

Meanwhile, Monica said, "I can tell when people don't want to talk to me, because there's nothing on the other end. I'll say, 'Give me a call when your TV show is done.'"

"I don't want to talk to a wall," stated Monica, 17, from Holy Trinity Church in Webster. Jim Smerbeck agreed that distractions can make effective listening virtually impossible.

So, he doesn't even attempt to begin a serious conversation when he thinks he might get tuned out.

"If somebody really needs to talk, I don't want to be in a room with a TV on," said Jim, 14, from St. Louis Church in Pittsford.

As these situations show, irritation can arise when people feel they're being tuned out.

"It's frustrating when you don't have a good listener," Rebecca said.

Michelle Anderson observed that she can be right in mid-sentence when friends will change the subject as if she hadn't even been speaking.

"I'm trying to say something, but people are more interested in something else that happened. So I just stop talking," said Michelle, 12, from the Church of St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads.

Monica suggested that many people who don't listen effectively aren't aware of their actions.

"They may not realize they're tuning you out, but they really are," Monica said. "To be a good listener, you have to have a lot of patience."

Michelle admitted that although she tries, she's not always the world's greatest listener either.

"It depends on what somebody's talking about. If it's something I don't understand, then I have more trouble listening," she said.

Michelle explained that although she's a good listener in one-on-one situations, she struggles to focus when she's not spoken to directly — for

instance, during classroom lectures and church homilies. Monica said that her ability to listen improves sharply when a friend seeks her out as a sounding board.

"I find myself being really patient. I know what they're saying is important to them. So I want to help them," Monica said.

But a sure sign of impatience, Rebecca observed, is when somebody interrupts frequently.

"You might really need to tell one of your friends something, and they interrupt you and change the subject," Rebecca said. "I don't think they're sensitive to the fact that they need to listen to other people."

And yet, Monica said that interrupting is a natural tendency that can be tough to control.

"I have a lot of stories to tell. So when somebody is talking about a certain event that reminds me of something that happened to me, I find myself interrupting," Monica said.

Michelle said she's less likely to interrupt a friend or family member than a stranger. "I probably wouldn't

interrupt a public speaker, but I might do it more at the dinner table," she said.

Many teens who are good listeners, Michelle added, were likely brought up to believe "that it's not polite to interrupt, that it's polite to listen to somebody."

Jim noted that if he

disagrees with what somebody else is saying, he interrupts on purpose.

"Before you give them a chance to finish, you jump in there," Jim explained.

In addition to interrupting, Rebecca said, excessive talking is another trait of someone who needs to polish his or her listening skills.

"If you're one of those people who talks a lot, people grow tired of listening to you," Rebecca pointed out. "I don't think people realize how frustrating it is for the person they're talking to."

Rebecca observed that people who normally take on the role of listener should also be given the chance to speak every now and then.

"Sometimes, people (mistakenly) think that those who don't join in the conversation don't want to talk," Rebecca said.

Rebecca added that it often seems more important for her friends to talk, rather than to listen. She said she has gotten "really frustrated" at recent youth-group meetings because participants didn't extend the courtesy of listening.

"A lot of people try to talk at once, and the mumblings and whisperings are loud," she said.

On the other hand, Rebecca said that a general willingness to listen enabled big talkers and quiet people alike to communicate during a diocesan retreat in December.

"It went really, really well. We all listened to each other and supported each other. Everybody had a chance to say something," Rebecca said.

Monica described good listeners not only as people who nod their heads and appear interested in what you're saying, but also offer good feedback.

"That shows that you're not just thinking about something else, or off on another planet," Monica said.

Michelle added that a good listener is somebody who "doesn't just say, 'm-hm, m-hm.' Sometimes they stop and think about what you're saying."

Jim agreed that effective listeners take the time to fully process what they're being told before they respond.

"They're people who don't say the first thing off the top of their heads. They wait a couple of seconds and ponder what they're going to say," Jim said.

Jim added that in most cases, a good listener should provide a response to help whomever is speaking.

"I don't think they'd be talking to you if they didn't want an answer," he said.

*I can't hear a-r-r-r you!*

*"To be a good listener, you have to have a lot of patience."*

Coming next week:

Saying "I Love You"