Active Listening: Using “PRIME SOS+” To Recall The Critical Skills of Crisis Intervention Specialists

By Jeff Thompson, Ph.D.*

The active listening skills of crisis intervention specialists

P.R.I.M.E. S.O.S.+

Paraphrase  Reflect/Mirror  “I” Messages  Minimal Encouragers  Emotional Label
Summarize  Open-ended Questions  Silence  Positive Strength Statements

Active listening is one of the most important skill sets a crisis intervention specialist must successfully employ while interacting with someone during a crisis incident.

Research has consistently demonstrated active listening as being critical for communication and conflict resolution experts to successfully and peacefully resolve conflicts and disputes. This includes mediators, crisis counselors, conflict coaches and (hostage and crisis) negotiators.

Aside of containing both verbal and nonverbal actions, it is not necessarily clear what exactly active listening is and what it consists of. This article sets out to clear the mystery and detail the individual parts that make up the “whole” of active listening while first explaining the value of active listening.

Many readers might already be familiar with active listening skills but it is worth reflecting on them again considering their importance in contributing to building rapport and developing trust with a subject. Rapport and trust are necessary for a negotiator to be able to influence a subject and work collaboratively towards a peaceful resolution.

This article also shares established active listening skills from a unique perspective. The PRIME SOS+ acronym (paraphrase, reflect/mirror, minimal encouragers, emotional label, silence/effective pause, open-ended questions, summarize, and positive strength statements) was created to increase the retention of each micro skill that collectively makes the acronym.

Active listening is both informative and affective-driven. Active listening allows you to gain valuable information from the speaker (it lets you know the “why” behind their positions or “wants”) and it develops rapport and builds trust (more on this below). Active listening entails just that, listening more than talking.
What is active listening?

Active listening, according to the MIT Sloan Communication Program, is defined as a general approach to listening that helps you gain more information, improve your understanding of other points of view, and work cooperatively with others. MIT further explains the person who is actively listening looks and sounds interested, adapts the speaker’s point of view, and clarifies the speaker’s thoughts and feelings.

According to a learning guide at the University of Adelaide, benefits of active listening includes it encourages the speaker to keep talking, indicates you are following the conversation, sets a comfortable tone, and signals to the speaker that you are attentive and interested in what they have to say. Each of these contributes to building trust with the person and developing rapport.

Retired FBI hostage negotiator Gary Noesner and Mike Webster describe active listening as being a “powerful tool” for hostage negotiators “to stimulate positive change in others.” The New York City Police Department’s Hostage Negotiation Team (NYPD HNT) also emphasizes the importance of a negotiator utilizing active listening skills during a crisis and hostage incident while active listening is also the key skill taught in mediation training across the country. For crisis counselors, active listening is the skillset that has been described by the Crisis Text Line as part of how you bring a person in crisis moving from a “hot moment” to a “cool calm.”

Mediators have described active listening as being one of the top methods to build rapport with the people they are helping that are involved in a dispute. Research has further demonstrated that rapport as well as building trust and displaying professionalism skills used by effective mediators. Building trust and developing rapport are closely linked while professionalism is as well. Professionalism is described as possessing the appropriate skills and using them based on the context of the situation.

Therefore, active listening when used properly and effectively, displays professionalism, develops rapport, and builds trust. This transcends the world of those who work specifically in emergencies and crisis incidents. While reviewing the skills below, one can easily see how when employed in other settings, it can contribute to you being a more effective communicator.

**PRIME SOS**

The PRIME SOS+ acronym is not an obscure collection of letters or randomly put together. Rather it contributes to the importance of active listening skills. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, prime, as an adjective, means “most important; of the highest quality or value.” This definition also clearly applies to active listening skills for crisis intervention specialists.

“SOS” is a term connected with someone needing help or assistance. When you combine prime and SOS together therefore in this context it complements the importance of active
listening skills. These skills are important and need to be used by crisis intervention specialist immediately during an incident to provide assistance to the subject.

The “+” designates the positive impact you are trying to make with the person you are interacting with.

Below are the nine techniques of active listening structured through the PRIME SOS+ acronym. The acronym is adapted from the method that is taught by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Crisis Negotiation Unit (FBI CNU) to their special agents and other law enforcement officials from around the world. This version expands on their training that includes perspectives and insights from other areas of crisis management including the work done by crisis counselors.

**Paraphrasing:** This includes repeating what the person said in a much shorter format that is in your own words while also making sure to not minimize what the person has experienced. Paraphrasing also entails including emotional labeling to avoid sounding impersonal and as if you are just giving a bullet-pointed, robotic recap of what the person said.

**Reflecting/Mirroring:** When the person is finished speaking, reflecting and mirroring is a much shorter option compared to paraphrasing as it includes repeating the last words the person said. If the person concluded by saying, “…and this really made me angry,” you would say, “It really made you angry.”

Some trainers even say it should be limited to strictly repeating no more than 3 or 4 of the last words spoken by a person. It might seem silly or even odd to when first attempting to do this but try it- you will see it helps validate the speaker and inform him or her that you are listening and understanding what is being said.

**“I” Messages:** This is used to counteract statements made by the person that are not conducive towards working collaboratively. The active listener states, “I feel___ when you ___ because ___.“ This provides a “timeout” or reality check to other person letting them know you are trying to work together and they, from your perspective, are not. It is important to be mindful when using this as to not do it in a way (be aware of your tone) that is aggressive and creates an argument.

It can also be used to acknowledge positive actions and statements of the subject to encourage more of it. For example, “I appreciate that you let (a hostage) go, because you stayed true to your word and it shows me that you are genuinely wanting to end this peacefully.”

**Minimal Encouragers:** These are simple verbal actions such as “mmm,” “okay,” and “I see,” and nonverbal gestures like head nodding that further establish the building of rapport with the person by you subtly inviting the person to continue speaking.

**Emotion Labeling:** It is important for the emotions of the person speaking to be acknowledged. Identifying the person’s emotions validates what they are feeling instead
of minimizing it. During a negotiation, people can act with their emotions and not from a more cognitive, rational thinking perspective. By labeling and acknowledging their emotions, it helps restore the balance.

It is important to note that when using emotional labeling, you identify the emotion, you don’t ask it (“You sound angry” instead of “Did that make you angry?”). With emotional labeling, you just want to “be in the ballpark” of the labeling. You don’t have to always get the exact emotion but rather be close to it (angry, frustrated, or bothered).

Emotional labeling is demonstrating you understand the emotions and feelings the person is experiencing- it is the opposite of simply stating, “I understand” (you want to avoid that).

Finally, remember you are using emotional labeling to acknowledge and defuse the negative emotions. Critical is the second reason- defuse – you are not simply acknowledging it and escalating their emotions, rather it must be done genuinely and effectively to reduce the emotions. Emotional labeling is demonstrating understanding (instead of saying “I understand”).

**Summarize:** Summarizing is an extended version of paraphrasing. It is wrapping up everything the person said including the elements important to the person as well as acknowledging the person’s emotions. Summarizing validates for the person that they have been heard and understood. This is critical to do as it can bring a sense of relief to the person and reduce their actions being dictated by their emotions.

Summarizing is also a valuable tool for a negotiator to use when he or she is unsure what to do or say next. Summarizing what the person has said has multiple benefits in this situation. First, it buys you time and as already stated slowing the process down is an important element to contribute to a peaceful resolution.

Next, summarizing can further contribute to the negotiator building rapport and developing trust. Rapport and trust then allows the negotiator to eventually move towards influencing the person to reappraise their situation and consider alternatives to a resolution and suggestions from the negotiator.

**Open-ended Questions:** Asking open-ended questions solicits the person to speak longer and thus it can help diffuse the tension as well as provide you with valuable information and insight into their perspective of the situation. This is not limited to actual questions but an expanded version of this micro skill includes (aside of “what else happened?”), “tell me more.”

Remember, part of your goal is to de-escalate their tense, negative emotions. Using open-ended questions helps you do that by encouraging them to tell their story.

**Silence/Effective Pauses:** Research has shown a major difference between expert hostage and crisis negotiators with non-experts is that experts listen much more than they
speak. Part of listening includes utilizing silence and pausing before taking your turn to speak. This draws attention to what you are about to say.

Also described as dynamic inactivity, silence allows the other person to continue speaking while combining it with pausing prior to speaking helps calm a situation. Keep in mind if the person is acting out of their emotions, he or she most likely will not be able to put their thoughts words together as quickly compared to you (who is thinking rationally). Providing the subject with time (silence), allows them to collect their thoughts.

Again, remember, calming the situation is critical as it helps move the person from acting out of their emotions to a mindset that is more rationally based.

**+ (Positive Strength Statements):** As a crisis intervention specialist, you want to not only acknowledge the negative emotions the person in crisis is experiencing through emotional labeling, but you also need to eventually counter their negative perspective of the situation that often can include feelings of being alone, hopelessness, and helplessness. Positive strength statements involve countering that perspective by helping provide another positive viewpoint.

Examples include “This is a lot for anyone to have to handle, it’s brave of you to reach out today”, “You are not alone, I’m here and I am here to help you. You do not have to take this all on by yourself”, “I’m impressed by your strength in having been through so much”, “People care about you”, and “It’s courageous for you to share that with me. I appreciate you trusting me.”

Gregory Vecchi, retired FBI negotiator and former supervisor of the Behavioral Science Unit, states there is an order of employing active listening skills. The initial interaction should begin with using what he calls are the core active listening skills in a specific order. The first skill to be used is reflecting/mirroring. Next he suggests the negotiator utilizes paraphrasing followed by emotional labeling and then summarizing. The remaining skills do not have a detailed suggested order. Other crisis negotiation and intervention training courses and research do not emphasize a specific order but do put an importance on open-ended questions, emotional labeling, paraphrasing, and positive strength statements.

**Conclusion**

Ostensibly one might think the above micro skills are common sense and easy to utilize yet further discernment reveals the realization that it is not just using active listening skills but rather using them correctly. Specifically, acting with empathy is what makes active listening genuine compared to feigning each of the skills. Remember, empathy is not agreeing with the person but rather it means understanding their perspective.

If you do not believe in each skill and do not care about what the other person is saying or feeling, it will show in your attempts at active listening so instead of building rapport
and trust, your actions will diminish it. This includes, even if you try to mask it, it “leaking” out through your voice.

Ultimately active listening helps build rapport and trust which then can allow a negotiation move to the next steps of jointly exploring options that can lead to an agreement or the person peacefully ending the incident. Active listening has helped crisis intervention specialists rescue suicidal people, end volatile incidents, de-escalate tense situations and it has helped assist people resolve what seemed to be intractable disputes. PRIME SOS+ can help you recall each skill associated with active listening so give it a try - it can help you during your next incident or other setting.

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