

Shore up friendships by making chums feel heard.

Let yourself listen

SELF shows you how to fine-tune your focus—and get more out of your conversations.

YOU SPEND 10 MINUTES TALKING TO A FRIEND AT THE gym, only to walk away unable to recall what she said. Or you stop to ask for directions, then drive off unsure if you need to make a right at the first light or a left at the second. Truth is, most of us *think* we're good listeners, but taking something in doesn't always come naturally. Some tips to help you absorb like a sponge:

Get over your fear of pregnant pauses To really listen, you need to give others a chance to get a word in edgewise, says Annette Richmond, the founder of Career-intelligence.com, a job-advice site for women, in Rowayton, Connecticut. That means resisting the urge to plan what you'll say next while the other person is talking or "rescue" a lull-filled interchange. Remind yourself that everyone has a different conversational style, then practice waiting a beat before answering. Once you slow the pace, it's easier to hear the person in front of you and tune out everything else.

Send the right signals People respond to nonverbal feedback as much as to words, so even if you're paying attention, you'll look like a lousy listener if you're gazing over someone's shoulder or checking your watch. "If your body language doesn't suggest that you're focusing,

11% of people say they feel listened to most of the time.

whoever is talking won't feel comfortable—and won't reveal what's truly on their mind," says Richmond. Worried about how you're coming across? If you're nodding or otherwise showing genuine empathy, a friend is likely to feel heard as well as seen. The best way to know for sure is to have someone observe you in conversation and review your performance.

Read between the lines "People are rarely totally explicit out what they are feeling," says Mary

Kay LeFevour, a consultant in Washington, D.C., who helps CEOs communicate better. "Most messages have a subtext - a good listener can get to that by framing the right questions." If a friend says "I hate my job!" for instance, don't take it literally. Instead, ask something specific, such as "Did anything happen today to make you feel that way?" Even if your probing doesn't nail the problem, your friend will see you're trying hard to understand.

Listen selfishly Ever felt the urge to flee when a chatty colleague heads your way? Ward off frustration by becoming a more selfish listener. To start, make a list of how lending an ear to others helps *you* ("Listening to other people's problems can shed light on my own"). Another bonus: Besides getting an update on a pal's life, listening well provides clues to what makes others tick. And that will make you a better friend and a wiser person. -Laura Markowitz