

# Do Not Interrupt: A Mantra for Mindful Listening

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In the many years that we have explored mindfulness with lawyers, judges, and law students, one of the most useful practices we have shared (and practice ourselves) is a mindful listening exercise we refer to by the acronym DNI. It stands for “Do Not Interrupt,” and the practice invites you to see what it is like to hold the intention of not interrupting someone for the length of a conversation. Should you find it helpful, you will find that periods of deliberate practice can meaningfully influence the quality of your interactions in business and personal dealings, reduce stress, and improve your overall well-being. The instruction is simple enough to remember, and below, we will share with you some practice insights and tips, followed by thoughts on the value of the exercise as both a listening technique and a mindfulness practice.

## The “DNI” Instruction

Watch people talking with each other, and you will notice a lot of interrupting going on. It tends to be reciprocated and often passes unnoticed. Yet the consequences matter. First, we miss out on what the person was going to say if not interrupted—they may need a few minutes to get

to the point or feel comfortable enough to get to the heart of the matter. Second, the person may perceive the interruption as a signal that what they say does not matter. This may be because we think we know where they are going or do not think they are going anywhere important. In either case, we risk harming our relationship with the person we interrupt. Not only might we be mistaken concerning our supposition regarding the point that the person we interrupt was going to make, but the depth of our connection is limited—kept closer to the surface. While we approach this topic from the perspective of difficult and tense communications, the ideas shared are also at play amid exciting and playful exchanges too.

A technique that will help you to [listen more](#) and interrupt less is to hold the intention not to interrupt a person who is talking. Rest assured, notwithstanding your best intentions, you will interrupt anyway. That's OK; it's a part of the process. If you are the kind of person who likes to make thoughtful and deliberate decisions, you may find this fascinating and a bit disturbing. After all, interrupting another person in mid-sentence tends not to be particularly deliberate and is rarely thoughtful.

By engaging in the DNI exercise, you will catch

yourself more and more. At first, holding back on saying the thing you feel compelled to say, or that you are confident everyone needs to hear, or that is designed to correct or stop the other person from talking, will be an act of will—a form of “white-knuckling it.” In time and with practice, the impulse to interrupt will begin to fade.

## A Mindfulness Practice

You may find it challenging to sit for 10 or 15 minutes to [practice mindfulness](#). Drawing upon DNI as a mindfulness practice can change this as you can practice during a conversation. Let’s briefly review a basic mindfulness practice and then connect it to mindfulness in communication to understand this better:

In [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#)’s classic definition of mindfulness, he writes of:

*Paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, to what’s taking place in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.*

Many mindfulness practices involve focusing attention on an object, like the breath, and when the mind wanders from the object, to bring it

back. With DNI, the object of attention is the person talking. When the mind wanders, attention is brought back to what they are saying.

If you have ever practiced mindfulness, you know just how rambunctious the mind can be, with attention scattered, shifting about, and getting sucked into the past or future. Research finds attention wanders about 50 percent of the time, so this comes as no surprise to cognitive scientists and likely comes as no surprise to you. Importantly, mind wandering is a form of self-interruption. Whether “listening” to the breath, the counting of breaths, or observing the activity of the mind, when attention wanders, the stream of present-moment experience is interrupted. With practice, we become better listeners to our own internal dialogue, and over time, we develop a truer, kinder, and more patient relationship with ourselves. [Krista Tippett](#) gets to the heart of this when she writes that “listening is about being present, not just about being quiet.”

## DNI as a Mindfulness Practice

As a mindfulness practice, the DNI instruction helps establish more favorable conditions to observe the mind that wants to interrupt. It is a

practice of becoming more familiar with and less vulnerable to the impulse to interrupt. If you listen to yourself carefully, you will observe:

- Critical thoughts, judgments, and analyses about your counterparty(ies) and what they are saying
- Agitated feelings like frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness
- Unpleasant body sensations such as increased heart rate, heat, and tension

Without a game plan like DNI, these internal signals will steer your attention away from what is being communicated to you. Attention is captured by thoughts, feelings, and sensations that reinforce them. Without DNI in mind, attention is split, rapidly shifting back and forth between what is being said and your internal experience. However, with DNI in mind, attention is redirected back to the person. The primary benefit is that you hear more and interrupt less early on. Over time, as you become more resilient in the face of internal agitation and less inclined to interrupt, the internal chatter begins to subside. Then, you begin to notice the more subtle things. You pick up on nonverbal cues, and as you become less judgmental and resistant to

hearing things you disagree with or have strong feelings about, you become more empathic and attuned to the other person's interests, feelings, and needs. By nonjudgmental, Kabat-Zinn is referring to the awareness that can be brought to judgments that arise, as awareness can take the sting out of harsh judgments, biases, and assumptions.

## Opportunity to Be Heard

It is a basic human need to be heard. Yet, consider how rarely we are truly listened to—as opposed to talking with someone who is planning the next thing they will say or half-distracted and lost in thought. We sometimes experience the impulse to interrupt because we *think to ourselves* that the other person is going on too long. And indeed, people can be long-winded. But perhaps it is more the person does not feel truly heard and, as a result, keeps saying variations of the same thing in the hopes of receiving some recognition that they are understood. You offer a wonderful gift when you genuinely listen to another human being—interested, open, aware of judgment, and receptive. You also offer yourself the gift of being less reactive, impulsive, unnecessarily critical, and able to simply receive what is being shared with you.

# Is It Ever OK to Interrupt?

The answer to this critical question is yes. A conversation is like a jazz performance. Every voice matters, and the experience is enriched when all are heard. In jazz, each performer must listen deeply throughout the performance to know when to join in, when to pause, and when to solo. Musicians joining in when doing so are responsive to the moment—to the shared experience—and not out of frustration or because they are feeling agitated. Similarly, we rarely do justice to a communication when we interrupt when feeling agitated. Ambrose Bierce made the point well when he wrote, “Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.”

What matters is not what we do, but the quality of mind that is motivating it. The more mindfully aware we are—both of what is being said and the tell-tale signs of our internal resistance—the more responsive and collaborative we will be, whether talking with a counterparty, client, parent, child, judge, or friend. When we are patiently listening to another, curious and interested in understanding what they are saying, feeling, and needing, regarding their voice as important as ours, there will be moments when we feel moved to join in. And when we do so, our attitude and



manner results in it not being an interruption, but a collaboration in the unfolding of the communication—of an opportunity to truly connect with another human being.

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