

Hearing Tactics Conversation Tactics

What are Conversation Tactics?

Conversation tactics are ways of adjusting communication to suit individual needs. They can help a person with a hearing loss to join in and enjoy general conversation and are particularly useful in difficult listening situations such as background noise. These tactics rely on combining residual hearing and speechreading (lipreading) with our experience of language and conversation.

Following are some suggestions to assist in conversation including planning, relaxing and using assertiveness skills.

Conversation Skills

There are many things other than hearing loss that can hinder listening. Willingness to listen and pay attention, our attitudes and our prejudices are all factors that influence our listening and our ability to receive the message. The mind has a thinking speed that greatly surpasses the speaking speed. Listening with an open mind will help avoid prejudices and incorrect conclusions.

The person with hearing loss can learn to shut out distractions by focussing eye contact and using observation skills. Refer to the "How Not To Say I Beg Your Pardon" fact sheet for more details and ideas such as listening for key information, using predictable language to your advantage and effective use of 'repair' strategies.

Planning Ahead

Many people try to anticipate the situation they will be entering. Considering the listening environment is important for maximal use of listening skills. It may be possible to plan where you will sit or stand, depending on background noise levels, lighting, visual distractions etc.

By booking an appropriate table at a favourite restaurant or arriving early to a lecture to get a seat in the most suitable position, the person with hearing loss is taking control of the situation by reducing the anxiety and strain often associated with a hearing loss.

Planning ahead may involve planning part of the conversation or "thinking through" the types of subjects that may be discussed by others at a specific social gathering. For example, in a bank the language usually follows the same format, so it may be possible to plan for any questions in advance. Some situations will be more difficult than others and it is useful to be prepared for this.

Relaxation Techniques

People with a hearing loss often find communication a strain because of their need to concentrate so hard on receiving the message. This can create tension throughout the body which can lead to extreme fatigue and a further breakdown in communication. An awareness of the areas of the body that hold tension and the use of appropriate relaxation techniques can make conversation more comfortable and enjoyable. Consider a range of relaxation activities including yoga, Tai Chi etc.

Assertive Communication

Assertive people respect the needs of the other person while meeting their own needs. They share rather than dominate the conversation, but are prepared to take the initiative in such a way that the rights of others are not violated. The conversation is balanced with both parties contributing more or less equally. This results in both people feeling relaxed and satisfied.

Example of Assertive Communication

Person 1: "Do you enjoy gardening?"

Person 2: "Yes, when I have time, do you?"

Person 1: "Yes, I have just moved into a new house so I'm starting from scratch. What type of garden do you have?"

Person 2: "Mainly native plants but I have been building up a herb garden over the last few months."

Person 1 missed the word 'herb' so asked a specific question: "What sort of garden have you been building up recently?"

Person 2: "A herb garden."

Person 1 picked up word 'herb' this time and decides to follow the theme: "I am also interested in herbs. I have been attending a course on their use both in cooking and for medicinal purposes."

Don't let people put you off with:

"It doesn't matter" or

"Oh, it's not important."

Try responding with: :

"I'm sorry, it does. I need to know what you are saying." or

"It matters. I need to know what you said."

Non-Assertive Communication

Passive Communication

Passive people tend to sit back and allow the other person to do all the talking. They feel self-conscious about putting across their point of view but are frustrated when they have not done so. They may avoid social situations fearful of giving a ridiculous answer if they have not heard correctly. By allowing the other person to do all the talking, they are putting themselves in the position of listening only, a very demanding task. They have given up any control over the situation. A passive communicator may begin to feel tense.

Example of Passive Communication

Person 2: "Do you enjoy gardening?"

Person 1 is unsure of word 'gardening' so covers up by being non committal: "Mmmm." (nodding)

Person 2: "What sort of a garden do you have?"

Person 1 picked up 'garden' this time but did not develop the theme: "Bits and pieces"

Person 2: "I've just moved into a new house so I'm starting from scratch. Is your garden well established?"

Person 1 missed the word 'established' so nods again hoping for the best.

Person 2, feeling rather desperate because of lack of response: "How long have you lived in your house?"

Person 1 missed the word 'house' and guessed the word 'area': "I've lived around the Blackburn area most of my life."

Person 2, puzzled and also feeling insecure at this stage finds an excuse to leave the conversation.

Aggressive Communication

Aggressive people tend to dominate the conversation, by not giving the other person a chance to respond, ignoring the visual and verbal responses of the other person and concentrating on their own point of view. The aggressive person may feel satisfied in the short term but will eventually find that people are avoiding conversing with him/her, so can end up just as isolated as the passive person.

Example of Aggressive Communication

Person 1: "Do you like gardening?"

Person 2: "Yes, I have moved into a new house."

Person 1 has not heard the response properly so to cover up launches into a lengthy statement that does not allow Person 2 a chance to respond: "I have a native garden but recently have been planting a variety of herbs. I have been to a course about medicinal benefits of herbs and I never go to the doctor now when I feel sick I treat myself. Last week I had a cold so I..."

Person 2, fed up with this one sided conversation, starts to edge away.

We all, at some time, experience communication problems in certain situations, especially when background noise or other competing messages are present. When hearing loss is an added factor, tactics need to be considered. Ideally, this requires awareness by all parties involved and the development of tactics to suit that particular situation.

The use of tactics can help maximise successful communication.

The Expression Audiology team run a Managing Your Hearing Loss course. Family and friends are also welcome to attend. These courses are held at various locations.

Related Information Sheets

- Devices for People with a Hearing Impairment.

For further details please contact:



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Expression Audiology is a service of Expression Australia, a not-for-profit organisation founded by the Deaf community.

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