

Situational non-speaking

Your ability to speak may be dependent on a number of factors including the social situation, who you are talking to, the sensory environment and any demands or expectations that are on you. This is called situational non-speaking

Situational non-speaking is where people are able to talk freely in situations where they are relaxed and free from anxiety but become frozen and unable to speak in other situations. This can be accompanied by either signs of extreme anxiety such as a racing heart and difficulty breathing or by a dull feeling.

“ I work in hospital environments sometimes, and despite finding such places a little overwhelming, I find I can cope, speak at meetings, deliver presentations etc. without too much problem. Especially if I've previously met at least some of the people who will be at the meeting that I am attending.

However, when I am admitted as a patient, especially if this is unplanned or non routine, my wife has to communicate for me because the, now additional, stress means I can't cope with the sensory environment.

This is quite typical for autists, and is important for clinicians and other healthcare staff to understand as they may see an autist in crisis and think that is their default state.

The amygdala

Situational non-speaking stems from the activation of the amygdala, an area in the brain responsible for keeping us safe from danger. The amygdala activates the body's Flight-Fight-Freeze mode when it perceives danger. This may happen in certain social situations and for autistic people in certain sensory environments. This activation causes certain physical responses such as the body stiffening and the throat closing up and can lead to situational non-speaking.

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Helpful strategies

Here are some tips which might be helpful if you are experiencing situational non-speaking

- Don't put too much pressure on yourself
- Know that you are not alone many autistic people experience situational non-speaking
- Try and gradually expose yourself to social situations- it may be helpful to be part of small social situations where you know you will feel uncomfortable but it is tolerable
- Try to talk to someone you know in social situations- talk to someone you are comfortable with in a social setting. It could be a friend or a family member. It will help build up your confidence to talk to strangers or in front of an audience
- Try some nonverbal gestures- Communicating in other ways can be helpful and reduce pressure. This can include pointing, nodding, smiling, miming, etc. With time, it may then be easier to talk alongside these gestures
- Relax your body- take slow deep calming breaths which will slow down your heart rate and make you feel calmer when you feel anxious. Check your body for tightness and rigidity, try to un-clench your muscles and relax them

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There are times when I lose the ability to speak in certain situations where I know what I want to say, but for some reason the words don't come out of my mouth. It is usually with strangers when I'm finding it difficult to know what they expect me to say in a situation. It is usually worse if it is in a busy environment and I am tired.

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Preparation

If you know that you will be faced with a situation where you will potentially be unable to talk, such as a doctors appointment, here are some suggestions for you to try

- Write down some notes of what you would like to say beforehand so that you can give these if you are unable to talk
- Take someone you trust with you and who may be able to talk on your behalf and discuss what you would like to say with them beforehand
- Ask if there is another way that you may communicate rather than verbally beforehand
- Prepare a note explaining your difficulties with communicating in certain situations

Useful links

If you would like to learn more about situational non-speaking and explore what this might mean to you here are some links to some other useful resources that autistic people have told us are helpful.

- Website- <http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/information/information-for-teens-adults/>
- Booklet- When the words won't come out
<http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/info-when-the-words-wont-come-out/>