A fact sheet about

Processing time in relationships

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Processing time in relationships

Why hard talks can go wrong when you process differently, and one plan to try.



Key points

- People need different amounts of time to work out what they think. This is called processing time (definition below).
- People also work things out best in different ways, such as talking it through, writing it down first, or coming back to it later.
- When partners differ, a hard talk can go wrong in both directions. One person feels pushed, and the other feels shut out.
- One step to try: on a calm day, agree a pause and come back plan for hard talks.

What processing time and channel mean

Your partner raises the holidays at the end of a long day and wants to decide tonight. You need time to work out what you think, so you say "fine" to end it. The next day you realise it is not fine at all. Or it goes the other way: you want to talk it through now, and your partner goes quiet and says they will reply later.

Neither of you is doing it wrong. You are working things out at different speeds, and in different ways.

‘Processing time’ is how long it takes you to take something in and work out what you think and feel about it. For some people that happens during the talk. For others it happens an hour later, or the next morning in the shower.

‘Channel’ is the way that works best for you. Some people think out loud and work things out by talking. Others need to write it down first, or send a message, or walk side by side rather than sit face to face.

When autistic adults talked about visits to the doctor, slower processing came up as one thing that made hard talks harder. They also said that being allowed to write things down helped. In one survey, autistic adults ranked email well above phone calls for most things. With close family and friends, many liked both face to face and written ways, and it depended on how close and accepting the relationship

was. Whether you speak, type, sign or use a communication device, or speak only some of the time, a hard talk can happen in whatever way works for you, with time to answer.

Stress plays a part too, because even mild stress can make it harder to think clearly. A hard topic with someone you love is often stressful. So a hard talk can slow your thinking at the very moment your partner wants an answer.

If you or your partner are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise some of this too.

More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

Why a mismatch makes hard talks go wrong

When one of you needs time and the other needs an answer, each can misread the other. The person who wants to sort it out now may read silence as not caring, or as a way to avoid the topic. The person who needs time may feel pushed, and may agree to something just to make the talk stop.

The same happens with channel. A message sent later can feel cold to someone who wanted to talk face to face. A long talk can feel like too much to someone who thinks best on paper.

This is true whether one of you is neurodivergent, both of you are, or you are still working that out. It is a mismatch that goes both ways, and it has a name: the double empathy problem. You can read more about the double empathy problem here.

The one thing to try: agree a pause and come back plan

Choose a calm time, not straight after a hard talk. Then agree three things together:

The pause. A word or sign either of you can use that means "I need time with this". It means the talk is paused, not over.

The time. When you will come back to it, such as after dinner, tomorrow morning or at the weekend.

The way. How you will come back to it. You might each write a few lines first, send a message, or talk while you go for a walk.

Coming back is what makes the pause work. Without a set time, waiting can feel like being shut out to the person who wanted to talk now.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for the time you agreed. You can also keep a note there of what you each want to say.

This plan comes from what autistic adults say has helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

It may feel awkward the first few times, and the person who likes to sort things out fast may find waiting hard. Try it on a small topic first, so you can both get used to it. If the plan does not fit, change one part on a calm day.

This plan is for hard talks, not for the moments when one of you is overwhelmed. For those, you can read more about explaining to your partner what helps you here.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, for example if the same kind of talk keeps going wrong between you. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you both, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

> All of this assumes you are safe with your partner. If someone you live with frightens you, hurts you or controls you, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732. You can call at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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