A fact sheet about

Going quiet around people

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Going quiet around people

Why you may go quiet around some people, and one way to step back.



Key points

- Going quiet around some people can be your mind and body protecting you, when a person or a place does not feel safe.
- It can be a shutdown of communication (definition below), and it is not shyness, rudeness or having nothing to say.
- Being judged, corrected or treated unfairly in the past can teach your body to stay on guard around people who remind you of it.
- Having a way to step back, or to communicate without talking, ready ahead of time may help, so you do not have to explain the quiet in the moment.

What going quiet can be

With one old friend or a sibling, you can talk or message for hours. Then at a family lunch with a partner's relatives, or when a neighbour asks quick questions at the door, nothing comes out. You know what you want to say or type, but it stays stuck, or it turns up later on the way home.

Other people may call it shy, rude or distant. But you share freely in one room and go quiet in the next, so the people and the place are part of it too.

Going quiet can mean different things: sometimes you hold back on purpose, because you are watching and working out what is safe to share. At other times it is not a choice at all: talking, typing or even moving gets very hard, and you feel stuck.

That second kind is often called a shutdown. Autistic adults describe a shutdown as being frozen, like a computer that has crashed, or as going deep inside themselves. Many say their body and their voice go still. They also link it to survival, because a shutdown often comes when something feels like a threat, and it protects them.

Freezing is one of the oldest ways a body keeps itself safe. When something feels risky, the body may go still and stay alert, so it is not a weak or lazy state. Research also suggests that stress can make it

harder to think clearly and plan what to say. You can read more about shutdowns and what helps afterwards here.

Why some people and places set it off

Your body often decides what feels safe before you have thought about it. Some things may tell it to be careful:

- someone who has corrected you, laughed at you or talked over you before, or who reminds you of a person who did
- quick jokes, sudden changes of topic, or a mood you cannot read
- feeling watched or tested, like a first meeting with a partner's family
- a busy, loud or bright place that is already using up a lot of your energy

Autistic adults who face more unfair treatment, and who feel they have to hide who they are, tend to report poorer mental health. So if your body stays on guard around some people, it has often learned that from real life, and it is not overreacting.

Part of it can also be a mismatch in how two people communicate, where each finds the other hard to follow. You can read more about the double empathy problem here.

Most of this research is with autistic adults. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

More broadly, research on autism 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.

The one thing to try: have a way to step back ready

You do not have to push through the quiet. It may help more to have a way to step back, or to have a script to communicate without talking, ready before you need it. Choose one to set up this week:

- a line saved on your phone that you can show or send, like "I've gone quiet, I'm okay, I'll reply later"
- a signal agreed with someone close, like a word or a hand on your chest, that means "I need a break"
- a reason to step away for a few minutes, like getting a drink, going outside or washing up
- asking to reply by message later, so you can share what you think once you are home

In health care, some autistic adults have said that visits went better when they were allowed to communicate in writing. The same may be true with family and friends. You can keep your saved line in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, so it is easy to find. If you want to agree a signal with a partner, you can read more about explaining to your partner what helps here.

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

Going quiet with someone does not always mean they are unsafe. It may mean that you are tired, or that your body does not know them well yet.

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, whether this happens every day or only now and then. 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 work out why some people and places feel unsafe, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Sometimes going quiet around a person is your body telling you they are not safe. If someone you live with or are close to frightens you, hurts you or controls you, you can call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732. You can call at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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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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