A fact sheet about

Losing speech under stress

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Losing speech under stress

What intermittent speech is, why stress makes speech hard, and how to prepare.



Key points

- Speech can come and go. This is often called intermittent speech (definition below).
- Stress, overload, a shutdown, illness or burnout can make speech hard to reach for a while, even when you know what you want to say.
- You do not choose it, and it is not rudeness. Typing, writing, signing, body language or other ways of communicating are accessible to you when speech is not.
- It may help to tell the people around you about it on a calm day, so they know what it means and what to do.

What intermittent speech is

The bus driver asks where you are going. You know, but the words will not come out loud. Or at the pharmacy counter you are asked your date of birth, and you could write it down straight away but cannot say it.

Intermittent speech means you can speak some of the time, but not all of the time. It may last a few minutes or a few hours, and it may happen more often when you are worn out. Some people call it situational mutism, losing speech, or going non-speaking for a time.

You may have heard of selective mutism, which is a formal label for a type of anxiety. It means a person keeps being unable to speak in the same social places, like at school. Writers on this topic, including autistic AAC users, say it often does not fit what they live with. Their speech does not always go in the same places, and worry is not always the cause. Illness, stress, too much noise and meltdowns can all make speech hard.

This page is not here to tell you which word is yours. Use the one that fits you, or none at all.

Why stress can make speech hard to reach

Speech happens in real time, so you have to find the words and get them out while the other person waits. Typing or writing lets you slow down and go at your own pace, so it may still work when speech does not.

Stress can turn down the front part of the brain, which you use to plan and to juggle several thoughts. Research suggests this can happen quickly with mild stress, if it feels out of your control. Speaking leans on that part, which may be one reason speech gets hard under stress.

In a survey of autistic adults, about half said their feelings often change how well they can communicate. Stress and worry tended to make it harder. Some said noisy or busy places, and people they did not know, could lead to losing words, while quiet, familiar places made it easier.

Speech can also go in a shutdown, which neurodivergent adults describe as freezing up, when talking becomes very hard or not possible. You can read more about shutdowns and what helps afterwards here.

In autistic burnout, people describe losing skills they usually have, for months at a time. Some say speaking got harder too, for example with people they did not know. Other neurodivergent people may recognise it in themselves too. You can read more about autistic burnout here. If speech goes mainly around certain people, you can also read more about why you may go quiet around some people here.

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

The one thing to try: let people know before it happens

Explaining is hardest at the moment speech goes, so it may help to explain on a calm day instead, in writing.

Write a short note of three or four lines that says:

- that your speech sometimes goes, for example when you are stressed or tired
- what you do instead, like typing on your phone, writing, nodding or pointing
- what helps from them, like waiting, asking yes or no questions, passing you a pen, or texting instead of calling

It might say: "Sometimes I can't speak when I'm stressed, but I can still type. Please give me time, and ask yes or no questions."

Share it first with one person close to you, like a partner, a sibling, a friend or someone you live with. If someone supports you day to day, they can help you share it with others, like a new support worker. In Understanding Zoe, you can make notes by typing or talking, so it is on your phone to show.

You can also ask for adjustments, so you do not have to speak on the spot: that might be email instead of phone calls, questions in writing before a meeting, or more time to answer. Autistic adults have said

they got better health care when staff accepted writing. You can read more about asking people to put things in writing here.

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

You can also read more about other ways to communicate when speech is hard 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, 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 with communication, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

> If you suddenly cannot speak and this is new for you, or not like what usually happens for you, call 000 straight away.

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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