A fact sheet about

Spoken instructions that slip away

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Spoken instructions that slip away

What listening effort is, why steps slip away, and how to make listening easier.



Key points

- Following speech takes mental work. This is called listening effort (definition below).
- The more work it takes to follow the words, the less you have left to hold on to what was said.
- Noise, a fast pace, phone calls and several steps at once can all add to the work.
- In the moment, it may help to make the listening easier, with less noise, a slower pace and one step at a time.

What listening effort is

The pharmacist tells you how to take a new medicine, while the radio plays and a queue waits behind you. You follow each sentence as it comes. Outside, you can recall the first step but not the other three.

You were listening the whole time, but following the words used up most of what you had.

Listening effort is the mental work it takes to follow and understand what someone is saying. In a quiet room, with one clear voice, it may take very little. It can take more when:

- there is noise in the background, or other people are talking
- the person talks fast, or gives several steps in one go
- you cannot see their face, as on the phone
- you are tired, unwell or stressed

It is not the same as hearing: a person can hear every word and still have to work hard to follow it.

Speech also leaves nothing to look back at. A note stays on the page, but a spoken step is over once it is said. So you have to keep each step in mind while the next one comes in.

Why you can follow every word and still forget the steps

You have a limited amount of attention to spend at one time. What you spend on working out the words is not there for taking in the meaning or for keeping it.

In a survey (49 autistic adults), most said that lots of people talking at once was too much for their senses. In another (209 autistic adults), about one in three could not take in what was said fast enough to join in talks about their health care. Autistic adults also had more trouble than other adults with following medical instructions in the form they were given.

In one study (19 ADHD adults and 20 other adults), ADHD adults with typical hearing understood speech as well as other adults, but it took them more listening effort. Australia's guideline on ADHD tells health workers that small pieces of information are easier to keep hold of, and pictures can help.

If you are neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise all 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 marginalized groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

Holding a step in mind while you use it is the job of working memory. You can read more about working memory here.

The one thing to try: make the listening easier as it happens, so more of what is said stays with you

Trying harder to listen may only add to the work. It may help more to change the place and the pace, so there is less to work through. You can choose what suits the moment:

- Less noise. Move away from the queue, turn the TV down, shut the door or ask to go somewhere quieter.
- A slower pace. Ask for one step at a time: "Can you give me one step, then wait?"
- A check on each step. Say it back, type it and show them, or point to the thing they mean, before they go on.
- A note as you go. Put two or three words for each step on your phone or on paper, and ask the person to wait while you do.
- Showing as well as telling. Ask the person to point, or to do the step in front of you.

A support person, or someone who knows you well, can also ask the speaker to slow down. They can note the steps with you, in words or in pictures.

If speaking is hard in the moment, or you do not speak, a saved line can ask for you. You can keep it on your phone or on a card: "One step at a time, please, and wait while I note it."

In the Understanding Zoe app, you can make notes by typing or talking, so the steps are all in one place when you get home. You can also add "One step at a time, please" to About me in your Understanding Zoe profile, where you capture your strengths and support needs, so it is ready to share.

You do not have to give a reason. "One step at a time, please" is something anyone might say. If you would like to get things in writing from the start, you can read more about asking people to put things in writing here.

These steps come from what autistic adults say has helped them. They have not been validated in research yet, so they are anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about them. And lived experience is valid too. Some people will speed up again without noticing, so you may need to ask more than once.

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 in most conversations or only in noisy places. 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 listening and with ways to keep hold of what you are told, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if following speech has become harder than it used to be. A GP can arrange a hearing check if you want one.

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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