

The trouble with strangers

By Damien Howard

Communication is about more than what is said and heard. People bring to a conversation a background of knowledge that helps or hinders the communicative process. This knowledge is particularly important with people with auditory processing difficulties. The relationship that people have provides the framework of knowledge that shapes their communication. With strangers, a limited knowledge of each other makes communication harder. Where people have an established relationship they find it easier to predict what the other may say- so it is easier to understand them.

I have to understand people so that I can predict what they are going to say so that I do not miss too much.

Knowing a person well also helps people to read their verbal and facial expressions more accurately.

*You have to know the person to read their expressions, not all mean exactly the same. With new people I can't judge intonation/pitch, so it's hard to know when they're joking, angry, sad, etc unless I know them.
(It takes time) getting used to new voices.*

Familiarity also helps someone to know the best way of communicating with a person with auditory processing difficulties - how and where to say things. So, established relationships support the communicative process in various ways. These issues have important social implications for those with auditory processing difficulties.

People with auditory processing difficulties are often more at ease with people they know well. Many people prefer to socialize only with those they know well as they find it hard to meet and socialize with new people. At work this may mean people gravitate to jobs where they have a stable and limited range of people they have to communicate with. One man I worked with had established a small family business where he worked mostly with family members and a few well known employees.

Nevertheless, some people with auditory processing difficulties can adapt to working with strangers. One woman I

worked with was very successful in the tourist industry where she was working with a constant parade of new clients. She knew the products she sold very well and had a range of 'mental scripts' that helped her make her interactions with travelers predictable. Her highly developed skills in reading body language meant that she was very client focused. Yet, despite this success, she found it difficult when her organization gathered staff together from different offices for team building days and confronted them with unfamiliar situations - she found that coping with unpredictable events in a group of people she didn't know well was terrifying.

This highlights the way in which people with auditory processing problems can be prone to anxiety. The level of understanding they need to be comfortable in a social situation is greater than for others and they can experience anxiety when they are in situations where unknown people are doing unpredictable things. It may be worse if you know you will meet strangers and think about it before. Many people find anticipating meeting strangers harder than if it just happens. Some people find they get so worked up being with strangers that it is hard to think, which makes listening even harder.

However, in established relationships people with auditory processing difficulties can be devoted partners and friends. They are often not as easily distracted by enthusiasms for new friends or new jobs. Preserving established relationships is often a priority so they can be reliable friends, partners and employees. They can be uncomfortable with strangers. This is particularly true when people's auditory processing difficulties are compounded by cross cultural communication issues. It is even harder to understand strangers from another culture. This is important for groups such as Indigenous Australians, many of whom have auditory processing problems related to endemic childhood middle ear disease.

People with auditory processing problems are at their best with people they know and with whom they are comfortable. The absence of stress and being accepted allows them to be more themselves as well as it being easier to communicate with well known people. Others accepting people's different

communicative needs is important for mental health as well as good communication.

Some ways of coping with social difficulties seeks to avoid difficulties, which may not always work. Some of these strategies are:

- *when in doubt, smile and nod*
- *pretend you have a hangnail that needs immediate attention*
- *if you don't get it, fake it till you do*
- *try to get away as quickly as possible*
- *pray that they are talkative*

Other strategies find ways to cope with difficulties. Some of these are:

- *Arrive early at social gatherings so you can watch and assess people as they arrive, instead of arriving to face a sea of unfamiliar faces.*
- *Find out who will be there and as much as you can what they are like before hand. This will help you feel more comfortable and even plan conversations.*
- *Don't forget others do not experience noisy group situations the same way that you do. Don't expect yourself to manage them as others do.*
- *Tell people when you find it hard to cope with the background noise.*
- *Go to social gatherings with a friend who knows you and can help to clear up any misunderstandings.*
- *Although it is easier to talk when you know others, take a risk and talk about what you are interested in to strangers.*
- *Find a quiet place and spend some time there.*
- *Use your understanding of body language to work out what is going on.*
- *Offer to help - having a job often makes it easier to cope, but don't hide in the kitchen.*

This article is based on comments made by clients or people participating in APDUK chat groups. The types of experiences described are not the same for everyone with auditory processing difficulties, but they are illustrative of the kinds of social difficulties and coping strategies of some people.

Damien Howard is a psychologist interested in the social effects of listening difficulties. More information on his work is available at www.eartroubles.com