

# Controlling the chaos

By Damien Howard

I have been working with adults with APD, via the APDUK adult online chats, to carry out some research into the social outcomes of auditory processing difficulties.

Chat groups are a great way to conduct group research into APD. A face to face group would experience all the kinds of listening difficulties that lead people with auditory processing difficulties to avoid groups! However, in an online chat group, people with APD can participate together and 'hear' what others have to say without any of the problems of face to face groups. In our on-line "chats", we have covered a range of topics. These include relationships, learning, stress and coping strategies.

This article outlines one coping strategy that can lead to problems in interactions with other people. The strategy discussed is where people with APD attempt to exercise as much control over their environment as possible.

For people with auditory processing problems, normal life can seem noisy, nasty and chaotic. It can be difficult to know what is going on and how best to respond to others. Being in chaotic situations can create feelings of powerlessness, confusion and frustration. These feelings arise in situations where others without listening problems cope easily. For people with APD, one way of reducing this chaos is to know what is going to happen without having to find out by listening.

One way to know what is going to happen is to exercise as much control possible over one's environment, so that it is predictable. Having a level of predictability in the environment reduces the level of confusion and distress. As one person eloquently put it, "structure and control are our fortresses against emotional chaos".

There is a need for people with listening problems to have routines, as well as their capacity to control their environment by seemingly 'bossing others' to achieve predictability. Others may not respond well to this attempt to control their environment, seeing it as an attempt to control them- conflicts and resentment may result.

*"Where I run into a lot of conflicts with friends (is) sometimes, I accidentally control their environment as well. Instead of telling me that I'm doing it, they get*

*mad and don't talk to me about it."*

*"Others may not like that (establishing control) and see it as us wanting our own way too much."*

Most often people simply see this as a personality trait - of being a 'control freak'. As well as others interpreting the need to control their environment in this way, people with auditory processing difficulties may also come to believe this about themselves.

Others may respond to the exercise of control over a shared environment as a criticism of them personally, especially if the person doing the controlling is a colleague or a boss.

*"Some see exercising this level of control as an implicit criticism of them - as a standard they have to live up to. They are put off because they think I expect them to live up to my strict personal standards. I have trouble explaining to them that it is not necessary."*

This desire for control can shape the kind of work that people are drawn to or how they do their work. For example, work which has strong routines or work where they can exercise high levels of control are attractive.

*"I became a teacher, in that capacity I can control the situation and sensory input."*

Within families, some members can become dependent on someone taking control.

*"I tend to organise everyone and they rely on it, then every now and again I get annoyed because I am doing everything!"*

For relationships to be stable, partners and friends need to be, or to become, accepting of living with established routine and/or the exercise of control. Sometimes though, other people may be attracted to this very propensity to control things.

*"She (a friend) has problems controlling her environment and she likes it when I'm around to control it. She likes chaos most of the time, so we come into some conflict over it, but not much. It's strange, but we work together well."*

To conclude, attempts by people with APD to control the environment may be resented or appreciated by others. It may irritate and frustrate some who see it as an intrusion into their rights. It can be seen as setting unnecessarily high standards, which may intimidate some people who think there is an expectation for them to do the same.

Others can appreciate the control displayed by people with APD, and even

come to depend on it. It can be easy to become a super mum or work hero whom others are dependent on. People with self-organization problems can be drawn to the order that is created. But then dependency on the organized APD behaviours can be problematic. The potential chaos of the every day world of people with APD can be hard enough to manage, without being surrounded by those whose lack of self organizational skills escalates the chaos. On the other hand, however, it can be satisfying to be appreciated for something that others resent.

There are no uniform experiences for people with APD. So much depends on how people with APD view themselves and how others view them. Often though, the processes which lead people to seek to exercise a high level of control over their environment are not understood. They can be seen negatively by themselves or others as being overly controlling. And those exercising control may see others who exercise less control as lazy or slack.

It is important to understand why many people with APD need a high level of control over their environment. It is most important for people not to compare themselves with others and criticize those who do or don't do this. Such comparisons are unfair and pointless when people have different underlying needs. It is like saying why don't fish fly through the sky as easily as birds, or birds swim through the water as easily as fish. The fact is each is adapted for their different environments. While a person with APD and someone without APD may look the same, they experience quite different environments standing together, for example, in the same noisy party.

Making critical comparisons on the level of control exercised and other qualities can eat away at the confidence and feelings of self worth of people with APD. One reason why understanding the controlling behaviour in people with APD is so important is to prevent people from making the critical comparisons that can be so destructive.

Understanding can help family, friends and workmates to accept the need for control that many people with APD have. Even more important is for those with APD to understand and accept this need in themselves. The capacity for critical comparisons to be destructive is greatest where the person with APD is making them about themselves, without understanding what is driving their behaviour.

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