

Think differently to avoid disappointment

By Damien Howard ©
www.eartroubles.com

If you experience auditory processing problems, you face communication challenges that other people don't. It is important to understand how this may affect you as well as that you may have developed compensatory skills that most others do not have. The challenges you face when processing auditory input mean that you tend to judge yourself too harshly, or place the wrong interpretation on what others are saying and doing. This article discusses some of these challenges and gives some examples from my work as a psychologist with people who experience auditory processing problems.

Many misunderstandings can arise when people who face auditory processing challenges do not realise that other people don't face the difficulties that they encounter. Many issues arise when background noise makes it hard for people to understand what is being said..

One woman, with an auditory processing problem, became very anxious about her performance at work when she moved to a new job in an open plan office. She found that she could not cope with telephone conversations when these had to take place at her desk and there was a high level of background noise in the office. However, she did not want to seem different from the others, or to ask for an office of her own. In effect, she wanted to be seen as 'the same as everyone else', but had decided she was a failure because she could not cope, as they could, with the noisy open plan office environment. When this woman sought psychological counselling for what she saw as an anxiety problem, her auditory processing problem was identified – for the first time in her life. However, it must be noted here that often psychologists and counsellors do not know that auditory processing problems can contribute to social difficulties, and to anxiety and depression, in various ways.

Another example, to illustrate the

relationship that can exist between social and auditory processing problems, is the case of a teenage girl who became angry with her friends because she thought they were purposely excluding her from their conversation at noisy parties, by 'whispering' to each other. While their speech was loud enough for them to hear each other, it was too quiet for her to hear easily in the noisy environment of the party, so she could not join in, or share in their conversation. She did not believe them when they said they were not whispering, so she would storm off, leaving her friends feeling upset and

“People with auditory processing problems often become very good at reading body language. They are often better at doing this than many other people, but may not realise they have developed an exceptional ability in this area, to a degree that most others do not attain.”

wrongly accused of something that they had not done.

Auditory processing difficulties can also sometimes lead to difficult work situations when an affected member of staff misses out on important information. One manager described a situation she encountered when she sent a strongly worded email, complaining that she had not been consulted about a decision. She was acutely embarrassed when told that she had been at the meeting where the decision was made. It was made during a part of the meeting she had 'tuned out' from, after experiencing listening

overload.

However, it is not only listening difficulties such as these that can cause problems. Sometimes problems arise because people do not realise that they have developed exceptional compensatory strengths in the face of their auditory processing challenges.

People with auditory processing problems often become very good at reading body language. They are often better at doing this than many other people, but may not realise they have developed an exceptional ability in this area, to a degree that most others do not attain. They have done so because this additional information helps them to understand what is being said. People often draw on this ability, in conjunction with another skill that also helps them to cope with auditory processing difficulties. They learn how to get to know others so well that they can anticipate their thoughts and feelings, as well as what they may want.

By getting to know other people, how they feel, and what they think about, they are better able to anticipate what someone may say in a given situation.

By doing so, they reduce the demands that listening imposes on them, and are better able to fill in any gaps in what they are listening to, so they can more easily understand what was said.

By reading body language and gaining an understanding of how people think and feel, they can at times anticipate what people want, when someone has not actually yet said anything about that.

So, people with auditory processing difficulties can often appear to others as 'mind readers'; they seem to know what others want and need before anything is said about this, and sometimes even before another person knows themselves what they want. This means they can be very empathetic and supportive partners, friends or co-workers, if they can use their skills to meet others needs, with minimal conversation.

However, problems can arise when people who have these skills do not

realise how exceptional this ability is, and expect the same of others. When others don't interpret their body language in appropriate ways, or anticipate their needs, they may not understand that others simply do not have the same ability as they do. Most people need to be told explicitly what others want. This sort of misunderstanding can lead to many disappointments. A person may decide that someone else has chosen not to recognise and anticipate their needs because they do not care about them, or do not like them enough to do so.

One man who came to see me for counselling about depression complained about his wife and his friends, because of this type of disappointment. He felt they did not give him the same kind of consideration that he gave them. When he had complained to his wife about this she had said that she had not known what he wanted, but he found it hard to

believe this. He had spent a lot of time mulling over his disappointments, and had rejected her protestations because of his deeply held beliefs.

I counselled one couple when the husband had not only convinced himself that his wife really did not care for him, but convinced his wife of that as well. He had presented so many pieces of evidence and believed so strongly that she could not care for him, that she had begun to think he must be right. Despite feeling that she did love him, and that she did try to respond to his needs as best she could, she came to accept that the way in which she loved him was just not good enough. It was only their deeply held religious beliefs that were keeping them together, despite his disappointments and her feelings that she was a failure as a wife.

With another man, his depression had served to distort his interpretation of his wife's responses. After arriving home late one night he could tell his wife was upset

but, unusually, she did not say anything about it. She was upset because she was worrying about him, but because she knew he was having a hard time she decided not to say anything about that. However, he began to think that she wasn't talking to him because she had decided to leave him. His negative thinking, because of his depression, had led him to place a catastrophic interpretation on his astute reading of his wife's body language, an interpretation that was completely wrong.

These examples illustrate the way in which anticipatory skills, and a belief that everyone has these skills, can lead to quite erroneous conclusions. In the last case, the man read the situation in quite the wrong way; his depressive negative thinking combined with his astute reading of his wife's responses.

If you have experienced similar situations, or you identify with any of the above stories in some way, then think about the suggestions that follow.

- Auditory processing difficulties do present challenges. It is unfair to expect people with listening difficulties to be able to cope with the demands of listening to other people in the same way that others can. Don't expect too much of yourself, however much you may want to appear to be the same as others. If you do judge yourself too harshly in comparison with others, you will underestimate the very real challenges that you face, and also your accomplishments.
- If others expectations and judgments are based on unreasonable demands on your ability to listen, their perceptions of you may very well be wrong, so don't believe what you think they may be thinking about you. Instead, make sure you maintain your relationships with people who do appreciate your strengths and abilities, as an antidote to the inevitable uninformed judgments made by others.
- Be aware of others limitations. They may not be able to read your body language and anticipate your needs. Although you may be able to 'mind read' and empathise with others quite easily, others may not be able to do so to the same degree. This does not mean that they don't care about you, or that they care less about you than you do about them, but they may show their caring in a different way.
- Your 'language' of caring may be through the way you can anticipate and act on other people's needs, but it is important to build your understanding and acceptance of the 'language' that others use to express their caring. Remember too, that you may need to tell others very explicitly about what you want, if they are to be able to meet your needs. You will have to use words and speech to help them know what you want and need from them.
- Be careful about projecting your own fears onto your thoughts about what others may be thinking, or what they may want. When you care about the way people feel about you, that is when you are most likely to be wrong in your interpretation of others thoughts and feelings about you.
- Be very careful too, about believing your own opinion about what people's responses may mean, instead of believing that people actually mean what they say. If you accept what you believe, and not what they say, you may push away the people you care most about, and who care most about you.
- Talk to others to check out your suspicions and fears. Are they reasonable ones? Make sure you choose sensible people to talk to, and people who are not directly involved in the situation. If you think you may be depressed, then it is even more important that you run a 'reality check' in this way, to test your thinking about what other people's responses may mean. It is also important to get some professional help. If you see a counselor and they are not aware of the kinds of challenges faced by people who experience auditory processing problems, then it is important to tell them about these. It may help to refer them to the APDUK website or www.eartroubles.com. Professionals you consult can use their skills more effectively if they understand about the kinds of challenges faced by their clients with auditory processing problems.

Damien Howard is a psychologist interested in the social and psychological effects of listening problems. See www.eartroubles.com for more information on his work.