

When You Go Quiet in Meetings

SHUTDOWN, ANXIETY, PROCESSING TIME AND FEAR OF GETTING IT WRONG

Being quiet does not mean having nothing to contribute

A meeting can move very quickly. Someone asks a question, another person answers immediately, somebody interrupts, the conversation changes direction and a decision is made before everyone has fully processed what was said. For a person who needs more time to organise thoughts, the moment to contribute can disappear before the words have arrived.

From the outside, silence can be interpreted as disengagement, lack of confidence, lack of preparation or lack of ideas. Inside, something very different may be happening. The person may be processing several pieces of information at once, monitoring social cues, trying to work out when it is acceptable to speak, worrying about interrupting, rehearsing a sentence, coping with sensory input and checking repeatedly that what they are about to say is 'right'.

By the time they are ready, the conversation has moved on. So they stay quiet.

Silence in a meeting is not evidence that somebody has nothing to say. Sometimes it is evidence that the meeting only makes room for one way of thinking.

Processing time is not lack of intelligence

Some people think best while speaking. Others need time to take information in, connect it with what they already know and formulate a response. ADHD, autism, dyslexia, anxiety, auditory-processing differences and many other individual differences can affect how quickly someone responds in a fast verbal environment. A delayed answer may ultimately be thoughtful and valuable; it simply does not arrive within the few seconds the meeting allows.

Fear of getting it wrong

Previous criticism can make speaking feel risky. If somebody has been interrupted, laughed at, corrected publicly, told they are too direct or repeatedly misunderstood, they may begin editing themselves before every contribution. Instead of simply sharing an idea, they run it through an internal filter: Is this relevant? Am I saying too much? Will they think I am stupid? Is my tone right? Has someone already said this? The mental checking can become so intense that saying nothing feels safer.

Anxiety can make words disappear

A person may know a subject extremely well outside the meeting and then struggle to retrieve language when attention turns towards them. Being asked unexpectedly, 'What do you think?' can increase pressure rather than unlock an answer. The mind can suddenly feel blank. Afterwards, perhaps ten minutes later, the person knows exactly what they wanted to say.

Shutdown, Overload and the Meeting Environment

Sometimes going quiet is not simply hesitation. It can be a sign that the nervous system has become overloaded. A long meeting, several people speaking, bright lights, screen sharing, background noise, rapid topic changes and the social work of interpreting everyone in the room can accumulate. An autistic or otherwise neurodivergent person may reach a point where spoken language becomes harder to access.

What shutdown may look like

The person may stop contributing, give shorter answers, look down, become very still or need much longer to respond. They may appear distant when in reality they are trying to reduce incoming information. Pushing them to speak more, repeatedly asking whether they are okay or putting them on the spot can add further demand.

Where possible, reduce pressure. Allow the person to listen. Offer the option to respond afterwards in writing. If they need a short break, treat that as regulation rather than a failure to participate.

Meetings reward speed more than we realise

Workplaces often say they want different perspectives while running meetings in a way that rewards the fastest voice. The first person to speak can shape the discussion. Confident interrupters get more airtime. Someone who needs thirty seconds to think may never find an opening. This is not necessarily an individual confidence problem; it can be a meeting-design problem.

Simple changes can widen participation

Send agendas and key questions in advance. Give people time to prepare. Pause after asking a question rather than filling the silence immediately. Invite written comments. Use chat in online meetings. Make it acceptable to say, 'I want to think about that and come back to you.' Record actions clearly. If a decision does not genuinely need to be immediate, allow contributions after the meeting.

Managers can also avoid equating eye contact, frequent speaking or quick responses with engagement. Someone may be listening intensely while appearing quiet.

When you know you have something to say but cannot get in

Prepare one or two points before the meeting if possible. Write them where you can see them. If interrupting is difficult, consider a phrase such as, 'I'd like to add something when there's a space,' or use a raised-hand or chat function. If the conversation moves on, ask whether you can send your point afterwards. Your contribution does not become less valuable because it arrived later.

A meeting should gather thinking, not merely reward whoever can think aloud fastest.

Creating Meetings Where More People Can Contribute

Inclusive meetings do not require everybody to participate in exactly the same way. One person may speak spontaneously. Another may contribute through prepared notes. Someone else may need to write afterwards. The aim should be to gather useful perspectives and make good decisions, not to measure how convincingly everyone performs in a group conversation.

If you are the person who goes quiet

Notice when it happens. Is it when you are asked unexpectedly? When particular people are present? When the room becomes noisy? When you are interrupted? When the subject is emotionally difficult? When the meeting runs too long? When you have not received information beforehand? Understanding the pattern can help you identify what would make participation easier.

You might ask for agendas in advance, written questions, clearer turn-taking, processing time or the option to provide follow-up comments. Depending on your circumstances, some changes may also form part of workplace adjustments.

If you manage meetings

Pay attention to whose voices are repeatedly heard and whose are not. Do not solve that simply by calling unexpectedly on the quietest person. Instead, change the structure. Share questions early. Build in pauses. Ask for contributions in more than one format. Stop repeated interruption. Make space for someone to finish a sentence. Give people permission to think.

A quiet employee may have noticed something everyone else missed. A person who speaks less may be listening more closely than anybody realises.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There is a particular frustration in leaving a meeting with the perfect sentence in your head — the one you could not find while everyone was looking at you. It can leave you questioning yourself: 'Why didn't I just say it?' But speaking in a fast group environment is not a simple task for everybody. It can involve processing, timing, language retrieval, social interpretation and managing anxiety all at once.

I would not want you to measure the value of your thinking by how quickly you can turn it into speech. And I would not want workplaces to confuse confidence with insight. Sometimes the person who pauses is still thinking. Sometimes the person who goes quiet is overloaded. Sometimes they need the question before the meeting, not ten eyes waiting for an immediate answer.

Your voice matters even when it takes longer to arrive. A more inclusive workplace does not simply encourage quiet people to speak louder. It creates enough space for different minds to contribute.

A meeting check-in: What makes it easier for me to contribute? What makes my mind go blank? Do I need information beforehand, more time, less interruption, written options or a quieter environment? What one change could make the next meeting more accessible?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health or employment advice.