When communication breaks down

Understanding the gap between intention and interpretation

What I intended

I needed more time to think, so I became quiet.

What was heard

You are ignoring me. You do not care.

THE GAP

The same moment can hold two different experiences. Processing time, tone, facial expression, sensory demands and past experiences may change how words are understood.

Visual model: where a message can change

INTENTION

What I mean

DELIVERY

Words / tone

INTERPRETATION

What is heard

REFLECT | What do I wish someone understood about my communication?

What makes connection harder?

Recognising barriers before they become conflict

Processing time

A response may arrive later, not immediately.

Sensory overload

Noise, light or competing demands can make listening harder.

Different meanings

Direct words and implied meanings can be misread.

Emotional intensity

Feeling criticised can make clarity more difficult.

Interruptions

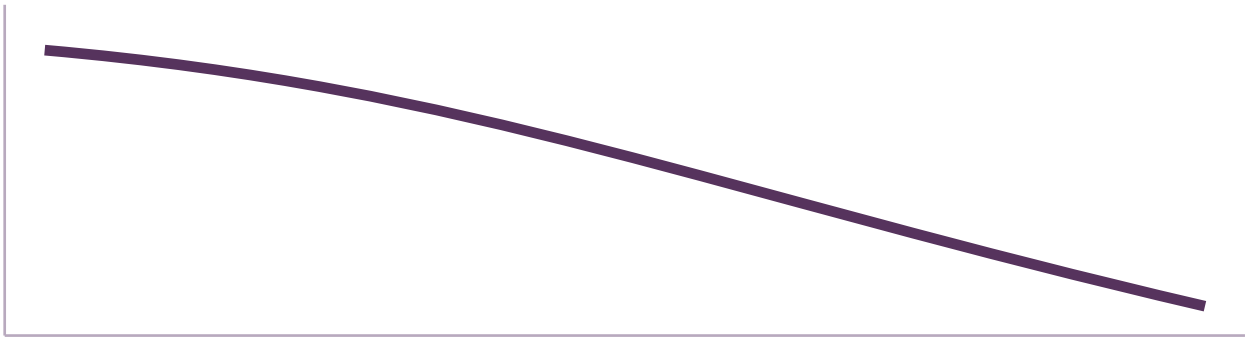
Losing a train of thought can feel invalidating.

Exhaustion

Low capacity can reduce patience and flexibility.

Illustrative capacity graph

Not measured data: shows how rising demand can reduce capacity.



Lower demands Higher demands

MY EARLIEST WARNING SIGN:

The breakdown cycle

A repeatable pattern that can be interrupted

1. A message

Something is said or left unsaid.

v

2. An assumption

Meaning is filled in without checking.

v

3. A reaction

Someone defends, pursues or withdraws.

v

4. Disconnection

Both feel less understood.

THE INTERRUPTION POINT

“I think we may be understanding this differently. Can we check what each of us meant?”

Where could we pause our usual pattern?

Reconnecting in practice

Small changes that make understanding more possible

1

PAUSE

Agree to stop and return at a specific time.

2

NAME THE NEED

“I need one question at a time.”

3

CHECK MEANING

“When you said that, did you mean...?”

4

USE ANOTHER FORMAT

Try writing, texting or using a visual prompt.

5

REPAIR

Acknowledge impact without dismissing intention.

A sentence I would like to try:

My communication agreement

A practical plan to revisit together

EARLY SIGNALS

I know I am becoming overloaded when...

OPENING A CONVERSATION

A helpful way to get my attention is...

A PAUSE PHRASE

If I need processing time, I can say...

CHECKING MEANING

We can check understanding by...

REPAIR AND RECONNECTION

After conflict, we will try...

This is a shared starting point, not a test. If a conversation involves intimidation or fear, prioritise safety and appropriate support.