

## **Paul Jacobs Maximize your potential:**

### **Social Ecologies**

Social Ecologies involve an individual's purposeful pursuit, sustenance, and maintenance of social and professional opportunities. This column identifies the chief barrier facing people who are deaf when interacting with a wide range of people. Some proactive strategies are prescribed to counteract this problem.

Some people appear naturally gifted when using social skills. Their huge popularity and warm charm may seem heaven-blessed. Think again. No one is born with social graces. The socially "gifted" constantly go outside their comfort zone and have mastered what is known as approach anxiety.

### **Approach anxiety**

Approach anxiety is an agitated state of mind that prevents people who are deaf from talking with new people when there are no real external barriers. I rank it as the single most damaging threat to people who are deaf. Why? Every genuine relationship begins and is continued through face-to-face conversation. Approach anxiety prevents us from maximizing our true potential as a friend, partner, family member, classmate, or work colleague. The damage is therefore social and financial. It also has a harming physical effect.

The intense anxiety activates the acute stress response, or the fight-or-flight response, and releases adrenaline into the bloodstream. Consequently blood vessels constrict, muscles tense, breathing and heart rates increase, blood sugar levels rise, and the immune system is weakened. Other physical symptoms can include shortness of breath, hot and dry cheeks, sweaty palms, and a tight throat. A loss of oxygen to the brain may explain psychological symptoms such as confusion, panic, and a total loss for words. Approach anxiety is therefore an unpleasant physiological state that may explain why many people who are deaf socialize with small number of familiar others, or with no one at all.

### **The restrictive mindset**

Approach anxiety is caused by the larger psychological state called the restrictive mindset - a collective name for all the fears and limits we place upon ourselves. These learned thinking patterns have been influenced by others, the media, and how we think of ourselves.

Socially, one of our unique problems is that deafness is viewed with considerable stigma. These negative associations can have a significant impact on the way others interact with people who are deaf. Such behaviors can include low expectations, denied opportunities, rejection, and not truly appreciating our skills or personality. Psychologically, it is difficult to escape this influence. Negative past and present experiences can therefore shape our restrictive mindset. As such, approach anxiety can be best identified through the following cognitive barriers to real-time conversation.

### **Approach anxiety explained: Cognitive barriers to conversation**

Five forms of cognitive barriers to conversation can trigger approach anxiety. Each are explained with specific negative self-talk that occurs when a person who is deaf experiences approach anxiety.

**Self-related doubt-** “I won’t hear anything they say”, “I look ugly with my cochlear implant/hearing aids”, and “I make an idiot of myself when I misunderstand others”.

**Other-related doubt-** “Others think I will cramp their style because I am deaf”, “They are enjoying their conversation and I’ll be interrupting them”, or “S/he probably has a boy/girlfriend”.

**Environmental doubt** – “The background noise is too loud for me to hear” and “These people will laugh at me when I misunderstand”.

**Doubtful whole-of-life rationalization** – “This is a waste of time and bound to fail”, “I’m not in the mood”, and “I already have friends and don’t need more”.

**Incorrect judgments** – “These people are not attractive/intelligent enough for me” and “Hearing people don’t like talking with people who are deaf”.

The restrictive mindset can also extend to visual thoughts like being harshly judged, mocked, ignored, rejected, and bullied by the person or group. Other images can include visualizing yourself as lonely, friendless, or as less qualified, attractive, successful and as a nuisance to all.

In all, the cognitive barriers to conversation, or approach anxiety, convince us not to begin or continue conversation. In other words, to quit or never approach at all. As a result, conversation does not happen or is reduced to an awkward or poor interchange. This negative experience adds more anxiety to future conversations and to an overriding fear of social rejection. Worse still,

little or nothing is learned of ourselves, of other people, or of information sources that may improve our quality of life.

### **The proactive mindset**

Approach anxiety can be significantly reduced by a proactive mindset - a system of practical cognitive and social skills. My Reframing column showed a proactive mindset addressing general life deafness-related issues. Ten irrational deafness-related beliefs were replaced with proactive thought processes. The difference in real-time interaction, however, is controlling approach anxiety when the conversation begins and continues. First, convince yourself that the thinking and images of the restrictive mindset serve only one purpose: damage. Then reframe the cognitive barriers to conversation and act on the opportunities for conversation outlined below.

### **Opportunities for conversation**

Opportunities for conversation are created by proactive self-talk and visualization techniques. When performed well, these strategies can significantly reduce approach anxiety. Below are five types of opportunities for conversation related to positive self-talk that you can use in real-time conversation. These are the opposites to the previous list of barriers to conversation.

**Self-related confidence-** “I am going to try some interesting topics of conversation until the conversation flows” and “The last time I stuffed up means nothing”.

**Other-related confidence** - “They wouldn’t be interested in what I have to say”, “This is a chance to enjoy the conversation with them”, or “S/he may have a boy/girlfriend but I want to know what makes him/her an interesting person”.

**Environmental confidence** – “I will be assertive and ask them to move to a quieter area” and “There is the potential for embarrassment but I can handle this if it happens”.

**Confident whole-of-life rationalization** – “Someone here might be able to help me with a job/problem”, “I’m not in the mood but I’ll persevere until I enjoy the conversation”, and “I’m going to find out what these people have in common with myself and my friends”.

**Correct judgments** – “Everybody has something in common with each other” and “People won’t make an issue of my deafness unless I make it a problem from them”.

Go further. Visualize how someone you admire will act your situation. This is what I do: when using humor, I frequently imagine how Larry David of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* would play with the conversation to cause a laugh. In conversation, I often envision how my mentor Dr. Joe Rosenstein talks with warmth and interest in others. These visualization techniques or/and proactive self-talk can distract you from the anxiety of approaching or being approached. Instead of being worried or self-defeating you behave in a positive way. When done well, something remarkable happens: you completely forget the anxiety and engage entirely with the conversation you are having. See my Persistence column for conversational ideas.

### **Reframe ‘failure’ as ‘feedback’**

Approach anxiety can never be truly abolished, only mastered. Even master conversationalists still feel nervous when talking with strangers. Regardless, they know and behave in a manner that without risks – acting on opportunities for conversation - there can be no gain.

Only one definition of failure exists: the refusal to take risks – to do nothing. We have not failed when our efforts or approaches have been rejected or come to nothing. We get feedback.

Mistakes don’t mean anything if we don’t regret them. Risks we have taken, however small, also provide us with the self-knowledge to improve future conversations.

We are born with just two instinctual fears: of loud noises and of heights. The fear of social rejection is therefore a learned fear – not something we are born with. Approach anxiety happens because we limit our potential and are not proactive. Overcoming approach anxiety therefore helps to create and develop conversations. These conversations lead to relationships over time and distance. Through these social networks we gain quality of life, happiness, connectedness, and financial rewards.

Social Ecologies is the fifth of eight themes that create Psychosocial Potential Maximization. The following exercise is your practical application of Social Ecologies.

Exercise: There are two tasks. First, watch DVDs of your favorite comedian. Second, watch movies of your favorite actor/actress. Study how these people use their body language, respond to circumstances and speak. Imagine what they will be thinking using the opportunities for conversation outlined in this column.

The following question prepares you for the next column’s theme of Potential Maximization.

Question:

Quote: "Perfect courage is to do without witnesses what one would be capable of doing with the world looking on". François de La Rochefoucauld, Moral Maxims and Reflections

*Editor's Note: The next issue of his column, "Potential Maximization," will be published in \*\* 2010, exclusively on AG Bell's Web site. AG Bell encourages you to discuss this and future columns with Dr. Jacobs through AG Bell's online community.*