



# Dyslexia Assessment and Consultancy

Email: [info@workingwithdyslexia.com](mailto:info@workingwithdyslexia.com) Telephone: 020 7582 6117

## DYSLEXIA: SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS

Dr Sylvia Moody

If you are dyslexic, you may be aware that you have a poor short-term memory. This may well affect your speaking and listening skills, since we need short-term memory to remember where we are in a conversation – what has been said, what still needs to be said. You may also find you often forget names, or can't find the right words to express your meaning. Perhaps you have a tendency to 'ramble' when you are speaking, and easily lose the thread of your thoughts when you are trying to relate or explain something to other people. You may constantly go off at tangents and get lost in detail.

Similar problems can arise with listening. You may have difficulty following the gist of a conversation or discussion, and find that you have instantly forgotten some instructions that have been given to you. You may keep interrupting people, feeling that, if you let them go on talking too long, you will forget what they have said.

### **Improving speaking skills**

In a social situation it is impossible to know in advance what topics of conversation might come up, and so it's difficult to plan in advance what you want to say. There might, however, be some things that you *hope* to talk about, and you could think through these beforehand. In order to speak clearly, you need to be clear in your own mind about what you want to say.

You also need to be clear about what you *need* to say, i.e., how much your listener needs or wants to know. Suppose someone asks you about your recent holiday in Antarctica. Are they making a casual inquiry out of politeness? Or are they eager to hear all about Antarctica. Their non-verbal behaviour will indicate which – for instance, are they staring intently at you, or have their eyes glazed over? Speaking without considering the needs of your listener is not communication.

In formal situations, such as in the workplace, you will often know in advance that you will be expected to give your views about a particular topic at a particular time, e.g., in a meeting.

*Before the meeting*, do careful preparation. Read any documents that will be discussed at the meeting, and make your own brief notes on them. Also make a note of any comments that you will want to make. If possible, discuss particular points informally in advance with colleagues who will be at the meeting.

*During the meeting*, you may feel nervous, but just allow yourself to be nervous. Put your anxiety on the 'back burner' as far as possible, and try to focus on the content of what is being said. Keep an eye on your notes and try to make your points at the appropriate moments.

It often helps if you have rehearsed some useful phrases. For example: If you find yourself rambling on in the meeting, and people are making impatient movements, just say: 'Sorry, but this matter is rather complex – perhaps it's better if I e-mail you my thoughts on it later.' This will allow you to cease talking with good grace.

### **Improving listening skills**

As with speaking, so with listening: there are informal situations that may leave you floundering. One way in which you can focus better on what someone is saying is to keep your gaze on the speaker. If your gaze wanders round the room, you are more likely to be distracted. In formal situations, such as lectures or meetings, you can take notes or record the proceedings.

### **Social skills**

Speaking and listening skills are part of the wider domain of social skills. A conversation is metaphorically a space inhabited by two people. In physical space we need to judge how far away we are, for instance, from a door frame; in social space we need to judge the best way to share the space with another person.

In making this judgment, we need to take into account a great number of things: how much we should speak, in what tone we should speak, what we should talk about, at

what physical distance we should place ourselves from the other person, what signals they are giving us, both verbally and non-verbally, and, likewise, what signals we might be giving them.

If you feel that your social skills let you down, you need to begin by getting a clear picture of what your present habits are, and then take steps to change them. So you will need to do the following three things: 1 Observe, 2 Analyse, 3 Modify.

If you feel a conversation has gone badly, go through in your mind the course the conversation took, and try to analyse what went wrong. Was it your fault, or was the other person difficult? If you think it was your fault, where did you go wrong? Did you talk too much? Too loudly? Or did you fail to make adequate responses to what the other person was saying? Were you even really aware that another person was present, or were you totally bound up in your own concerns?

Having observed and analysed your behaviour, you may decide that you want to modify it. Let's say, for example, that you feel you are in the habit of talking too much. How can you stop yourself doing this? It is not enough to be aware, in the abstract, that this is a bad habit; you now need to maintain this awareness *at the time you are engaging in a conversation*. Then you can take steps to alter your behaviour during the conversation. So keep a sharp eye on yourself when you are conversing with someone. Some people like to imagine this observational side of themselves as a separate person, a sort of mentor who will give you a nudge when you are talking too much.

In order to bring yourself suddenly to a stop when you are in full flow, you might need to openly acknowledge your problem. For instance, you can say: 'Oh sorry, I've gone off at a tangent again -- the important thing is...' In general, you could try to be more careful about leaving space for the other person to talk. For instance, you could bring them into the conversation by asking them for their opinion, rather than simply telling them yours. Changing ingrained habits is not easy, but if you cultivate an awareness of how you are behaving, and actively devise strategies for altering bad habits, then you should gradually be able to bring about change. You might like to keep a 'log' of your progress.

**Useful books:**

*Dyslexia: How to Survive and Succeed at Work*. Sylvia Moody. Random House (Vermilion).

*Dyslexia and Employment: a Guide for Assessors, Trainers and Managers.*

Edited by Sylvia Moody. Wiley Blackwell.

*Dyslexia in the Workplace: an Introductory Guide.* Diana Bartlett and Sylvia Moody.

Wiley Blackwell.

*Living with Dyspraxia.* Mary Colley. Jessica Kingsley.

**Comprehensive information sheets: [www.workingwithdyslexia.com](http://www.workingwithdyslexia.com)**

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[symoody@aol.com](mailto:symoody@aol.com)