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[Home](#) > Difficulty maintaining eye contact

Difficulty maintaining eye contact ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I've been experiencing in the past few months something that I understand, but am unable to deal with effectively. It is the difficulty to maintain eye contact while conversing with others. Usually my thinking drifts from paying attention to the conversation into concentrating on where should I look. It's really annoying and sometimes it makes me avoid people just because I'll be unable to have eye contact with them.

What is also annoying is that I feel that the person I'm talking to is getting unnecessary tension because of my "looks" that I'm sure do not carry any bad feelings or insinuations. I've read an article suggesting that this could be part of a "shyness syndrome," however, I do not consider myself to be shy.

Finally, this phenomenon fluctuates, but I haven't been able to relate this fluctuation to any specific factor (i.e., it does not change whether talking to men or women). Thanks for your valuable answer.

Yours,
The Appreciative inquirer

Answer

Dear The Appreciative inquirer,

Many people, shy or not, find that they need help with their conversational skills. Although you don't consider yourself to be shy, you might have at least one thing in common with shy people: you may attach more meaning to your own words and actions (in this case, eye contact) than those around you. Naturally, you're less able to tune into the actual words and flow of a conversation because you're paying attention to where your eyes are. You should know, though, that noticing this as an area to work on is a great first step. What would it be like for you to be a confident and effective conversationalist?

If you're interested in getting to that point, there are *lots* of resources available. Countless books have been written on this very topic. Two that come to mind that you might find useful are Dale

Carnegie's *The Leader in You: How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* and *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. You can also look into courses in conversation or social skills that are often offered at the YM/YWCA or local schools, including community colleges.

Although books and classes can offer tremendous benefits, you might also take some time to explore some possible reasons why things are the way they are. How much value do you put on eye contact? Do you think people won't respond to you unless you maintain complete and direct eye contact? Might you think you're not good at socializing, and never will be, because you can't maintain eye contact (that's unlikely, by the way)?

These questions will surely open you up to the notion that beliefs influence actions. To address these sorts of beliefs, it'd be useful to partner with a counselor. If you're a student, you can make an appointment at your school's counseling department or mental health clinic. Student or not, you can log into the National Institute of Mental Health's [Getting Help: Locate Services](#) [2] for more information on finding a counselor in your area.

Whether you look into books, courses, and/or counseling next, you've already taken a bold step to improve your conversational skills. It's hard to admit areas that could benefit from some hard work and positive change. With each step you take toward tackling this difficult issue, your relationships and self-confidence will benefit.

Alice!

Category:

[Emotional Health](#) [3]

[Communication Concerns](#) [4]

Related questions

[Shyness?](#) [5]

[Shy grad student](#) [6]

[Blush flush?](#) [7]

[I feel like I have lost the ability to communicate with people](#) [8]

Resources

[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) [9]

[Mental Health Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [10]

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Footer menu

▼ [Contact Alice!](#)

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Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/difficulty-maintaining-eye-contact>
- [2] <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/getting-help-locate-services/index.shtml>
- [3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/emotional-health>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/communication-concerns>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/shyness>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/shy-grad-student>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/blush-flush>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/i-feel-i-have-lost-ability-communicate-people>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>