

# The sounds of silence



*Silence can restore calm and allow your body to heal*

ENJOY THE silence.  
(Thomas Leuthard/Flickr)

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**A**s a clinical psychologist, I was taught to interpret the silence within a therapy session – when is there silence and how is it used? Is there too much or too little? Is it good or bad? Is it welcomed or uncomfortable? How do talking and silence get shared within a session? Who talks when, how and why? Who interrupts and how?

Is the home noisy or quiet? Do people study in silence or with the television blaring? Are people comforted by quiet or does it scare them? Does a dyad speak to each other? Is the silence within a relationship good or bad? How do they use the silence in between speech? How does silence impact communication? How are language and words used? What's the nature of the language, and when evaluated, what do we see? What does the way people talk, hear and listen to others say about the individual and their relationships? What are the tone, fluency and cadence like, and what are the words used?

Silence has such an impact that when I googled it, I received 33,400,000 results. I had strangely written this column a month before “coronavirus” was a household word. Now, in these pandemic days, silence has become even more pervasive!

We need to count the blessings of life even more right now. Here are some suggestions of how you might best use silence and sound in your life.

1. A smart person contemplates his words and intentionally chooses what to say before speaking. Weigh the value and meaning of each word, as it has tremendous power. Once spoken, words can never really be taken back, or their painful impact forgotten, even if forgiven. An insulting joke or words spoken in anger may cause pain.

2. Evaluate the consequences of your words (and actions) before speaking. This is especially true for children and adults who are impulsive, often acting before they think. It's difficult to listen or to think while you speak. Therefore, teach children to stop, think about a situation, evaluate the possible consequences and only then talk.

3. Take the time to really listen to your partner,

rather than talking simultaneously or formulating what you'd like to say. You may discover that what you thought you wanted to say is no longer relevant.

4. Call your child (and adults) by name and look at them to ensure you have their full attention before speaking. It's easy to be distracted by the presence of a screen and not make eye contact. This is essential for meaningful social engagement.

5. Filter your words. Not everything you think needs to be said. Unless you have something nice to say, don't say anything. Ask yourself whether what you say will be helpful, and how it might be heard, and if not, ask yourself why, and whether you need to say it.

6. Say what you mean and mean what you say. You can say anything to anyone. How you say it will determine how it will be heard. Pay attention not only to your actual words but also to your tone.

7. Appreciate silence. Close your eyes, take in a deep breath and slowly breathe out, just noticing what is going on in your own body and in the world around you. Silence, as you may have discovered, can restore calm and allow your body to heal.

8. Noise can greatly affect your stress level. Construction sounds, dogs barking, children screaming, horns honking all have an impact. Notice how your body reacts so you can reduce their impact.

9. Enjoy a baby's cooing and a bird's tweeting. You may need to fine-tune your listening to experience these sounds.

10. A quiet organized environment provides calm, and enables everyone to better focus, concentrate and create. Children especially get tremendously distracted by background noise.

11. A mother who is well attuned to her baby instinctively knows how to modulate her voice and soothe her baby.

12. Evaluate your environment. Is it optimal for both listening and speaking? How is it for your children? Do people talk to and hear each other? Do they listen? Is there an opportunity to “silence” technology and just enjoy the quiet from within?

13. Take a walk (even if brief these days) outdoors in nature. When it's quiet, you may discover that your other senses come alive and that you'll see and smell so much better.

14. Don't always speak right away. If, for example,

a child does something wrong, pause, and let them know that you need to think about your response before you speak. Taking time to calm yourself and organize your thoughts enables you to refuel and respond more effectively.

15. People feel less anxious when they feel they're heard. In these stressful times, let them know you got their message but can respond only later. We feel safest when we feel that others “get” us. We may need to “feel heard” almost immediately, even if it is just a thumbs up to a WhatsApp. In 2020, with “fast” everything, our ability to wait for a response is very limited.

16. Actions speak louder than words. What you say is not nearly as important as what you do. There are talkers who talk a good game, and doers who get things done. Are you a good role model for your children?

17. Guard your speech. Anatomically we're blessed to have one mouth but two ears, and our tongue placed behind our lips and teeth. Perhaps it's in order to listen more than we speak. Language, when appropriate, can honor the person you want to be.

18. Silence is sometimes the most appropriate communication. For example, in a shiva house, it's best to be silent and wait for the mourner to speak first. Sometimes, silence can be as helpful, healing and comforting to the mourner as our words.

19. Young children learn early on that words get a response from others. They love to repeat words. Repetition of words and thoughts is a valuable tool in therapy, as paraphrasing and reflection ensure that words are truly understood. So often we misunderstand and misinterpret someone else's motives and respond in a way that doesn't reflect the actual message, leading to a disagreement.

SILENCE AND speech, when used appropriately are incredibly powerful. In these days when we are home more with our loved ones, or communicating via Zoom, chat or whatever, I hope that they can add immeasurably to our lives. ■

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