



PSYCHOLOGY

Awkward Silences: 4 Seconds Is All It Takes to Feel Rejected

By Maia Szalavitz | Dec. 30, 2010

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It's the pause that doesn't refresh, the awkward moment that you relive over and over and over after you've realized that once again, you've put your foot in it.

New research from Holland suggests that good conversational flow has a powerful effect on people's feelings of self-esteem and belonging, and that even brief — just four seconds long — silences during a conversation



...elicit primal fears, activating anxiety-provoking feelings of incompatibility and exclusion.

“Conversational flow is associated with positive emotions, and a heightened sense of belonging, self-esteem, social validation and consensus,” a research team led by psychologist [Namkje Koudenburg](#) writes in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. “Disrupting the flow by a brief silence produces feelings of rejection and negative emotions.”

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For the study, researchers performed two experiments in which they studied participants’ responses to awkward silences. In the first, 102 college students read one of two stories. The first version described someone making an insensitive remark — “I think obese people should pay for two seats on the bus” — which was followed by an obvious silence. In the alternate story, conversation flowed easily after the remark.

The students were asked to imagine themselves as being the person who made the faux pas. Not surprisingly, they reported feeling more anxious, rejected and less self-assured in the scenario with the awkward silence than in the alternate version.

The second experiment involved 60 undergrads watching videos of similar alternate scenarios, but in this case, the questionable remark took place in a conversation about relationships and involved the topic of sex between students and professors. In one case, the statement was followed by a four-second silence; in the other version, conversation continued to flow smoothly. Although the videos contained no other cues about the silence and viewers weren’t even consciously aware of the pause, students who viewed the version that contained the break in conversation again reported greater feelings of rejection and lower self-esteem.

The researchers suggest that sensitivity toward signs of rejection and exclusion arose during our evolutionary history — one in which being excluded from a group could literally mean the difference between life and death. These days, luckily, the consequences of social rejection are typically far less dire — even if it doesn’t feel that way at the time.

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