

APD, PHONES, VIDEO CONFERENCING AND VIRTUAL LEARNING

© Alyson Mountjoy and Anna Williams

With people working and learning from home more than ever, more communication difficulties are arising for people with Auditory Processing Disorder/APD. APD is a neurological condition that affects the way that the brain processes sound and speech. APD affects the understanding of speech and can also affect remembering what is heard and processing it in the correct order; there may also be gaps in what is processed or misprocessed sections. The issues listed here can affect employees, employers, learners and educators. The difficulties will need addressing to support anyone affected. The outcomes will include successful meetings, more efficient working practices, increased productivity and a more positive learning and teaching environment. The suggestions below are also useful for those who are hard of hearing (and are basic good practice to ensure understanding for all).

A. The difficulties

People with APD can have particular difficulty with using the phone or participating in online meetings. There are several reasons for this.

1. People with APD benefit from clarity of sound. A major reason for problems with phones is degraded sound signals affecting the quality of speech. This also applies to using or any kind of electronic/digital communication using software such as Zoom, Skype etc. (which can also be compromised by a poor internet service causing an intermittent signal and participants using poor quality microphones).
2. People with APD also have difficulty with processing and understanding unfamiliar voice patterns and strong accents. Phones and electronic/digital communication make this worse, even affecting familiar voices because they sound different.
3. People with APD also rely on visual clues such as lipreading, facial expressions and body language to aid processing. In phone conversations, these are absent. During video conferencing, this is also a problem, especially when visual whiteboards and presentations are used and the speaker can't be observed at these times. Also, there is often a delay which means that what others are seen to say might not coincide with what is heard, adding to the confusion when trying to process it all. Poor visual quality and a frozen screen can also add to these difficulties, with some parts of the conversation being missed.
4. Problems can also be caused (to any participant) by several people talking at once, due to a speech delay and a tendency for participants everyone speaking when there is a lull in the conversation. Some video conferencing platforms allow the host to mute participants, allowing only one person one at a time and this is always preferable. But due to slow processing, it can also be hard for a person with APD to process that a different person is speaking, or what they say before it changes again. Also, due to added word retrieval problems, those with APD might respond inappropriately after the topic has changed, causing them embarrassment.

All of these issues can cause exhaustion, sensory overload, added stress and anxiety. These, in turn, make processing even harder for the person with APD and they can't understand what is said participate in the meeting effectively (which leads to added distress if they don't fully know/remember what was discussed, or what they have been asked to do).

Problems with virtual learning

As well as the other issues mentioned, there can also be additional problems around virtual lessons/lectures/seminars for learners with APD of all ages (and for teachers/lecturers). Reported problems include:

1. Subject-specific issues - like vocabulary
2. Fatigue - from this type of learning needing more concentration/processing
3. Speed of classes - they can be faster virtually and the learner can fall behind more easily
4. Lack of one-to-one discussion using this format – can't check with a friend or other learner that you have understood
5. Children being penalised for not answering questions fast enough when in competition with others – processing even slower when online/not enough time allowed to answer before the next question is asked
6. Not processing other learners' responses to questions
7. A feeling of isolation and mental health issues from being alone and the stress of this method of learning etc.

However, some learners with APD have found virtual teaching to be beneficial where it was made more visual (and this is also essential in the classroom). Other benefits were found where the teacher/tutor muted everyone except the person speaking, also cutting out much of the background noise which can also be a barrier to effective auditory processing. But to aid learners of all ages (and teachers who may have difficulty teaching virtually), pre-printed notes and presentation handouts should be provided beforehand. Learners can read them in advance and familiarise themselves with the topic and new subject-specific vocabulary, which should be listed and explained. (*This simple yet vital reasonable adjustment should be provided for all learners with APD in any teaching environment, virtual or otherwise).

These are just some issues that can arise; you or your child may have different ones. Virtual lessons don't work for all children and such teaching can be inaccessible to some children and adults with APD and other types of SEN/ALN. Anyone who is struggling with it and falling behind needs support, alternative teaching methods, and differentiated work (in all situations). Parents should speak to their child's teacher (or SENCo, as with a teacher who has APD) and adults should speak to their tutor, mentor or SEN support department.

Problems with virtual medical and other appointments.

As well as all the other issues mentioned, virtual medical appointments and dealing with various organisations like local councils etc. brings the added difficulties caused by using different conference programs. The lack of familiarity with these programs (which you might only need to use once) and unfamiliar voices adds to the difficulties and it would be harder to set up reasonable adjustments. But you can always ask for a follow-up email or letter confirming what was discussed.

There are tips on the following pages that can help with phone use and online meetings. Many are also applicable to virtual learning and appointments, even phone calls and online conversations with family and friends.

B. Types of help

Environment and equipment – how to help yourself

1. Always carry out a phone conversation or conference call in a quiet room with minimal background noise to aid understanding.
2. When making a phone call or video conferencing from home, ensure that the room has the door closed and that you will not be disturbed by housemates, family members, or pets, to minimise disruption and give you privacy (to prevent potential breaches of confidentiality and data protection). Also, set your mobile phone to silent mode when participating in a virtual meeting.
3. Ensure that the room has good lighting so that everyone else in the call can see your face clearly (to read lips etc.)
4. If you can, use a PC or laptop instead of a mobile phone or tablet/iPad for video conferencing. Ensure that the laptop is placed on a firm surface (not your lap) to prevent movement of the screen.
5. Always use good headphones (noise-cancelling ones if possible), not just the speakers on your laptop or PC. This will help to improve sound quality, direct speech to your ears (instead of it getting lost around the room) and block background noise.

**Necessary equipment can be provided by your company voluntarily or as a reasonable adjustment under certain circumstances. Details are provided later in this document.*

Help with phone calls – for employers

Please avoid phone calls unless absolutely necessary. Phone calls might be futile if the person on the other end of the line cannot understand you and can cause extreme distress for the person with APD. An email or text is far easier for those with processing difficulties to understand and provides a written record of what you said and what they need to do. The tips below are essential if a phone call cannot be avoided.

(These are all reasonable adjustments that an employee with APD might request).

1. Provision of speech to text software for staff members with APD loss can help enormously, ensuring full understanding and inclusion. Apps are also available for mobiles.
2. If you do not provide this software, please allow the person with APD extra time to process what you say. Also, keep calls brief. Speak clearly and use plain language; there is no need to raise your voice (APD does not affect hearing). They may hear you but might not process/understand any or all of it. Ask questions one at a time, allowing time for the other person to write notes. They will also need time to formulate replies, also allowing for word retrieval problems.
3. The caller should always provide a follow-up email as a record of what was discussed and any actions needed, to allow for any misprocessing. This email should include the date and time of the next meeting, if possible, allowing time for the recipient to prepare and complete any requested actions.
4. Send an email a day or two before the next phone meeting, as a reminder, including what you will need to discuss (if known) and a list of any unfamiliar terms which you may need to discuss (new software programs, or products etc.) so that the recipient can familiarise themselves with them beforehand. This might also be useful for all employees.

5. A follow-up email after a conference call is also essential, as a reminder for the person with APD, with a recap of what was discussed/decided and actions to be carried out.
6. The person with APD should not be expected to take notes for this or any in-person meetings as these may be incorrect or incomplete due to their APD. Also, as with other types of verbal communication, they might think they have understood something but totally misprocessed part or all of it.

(These are all reasonable adjustments that an employee with APD can request).

Help with video conferencing - for meeting hosts

There are times when video conferencing is needed. These simple tips can help everyone.

1. Email each participant beforehand with a printable agenda attached, plus a list of any new technical or job-specific terms or products (as with phone call preparation, to allow time for familiarisation). This will help all staff members, not just those with APD.
2. It would be helpful for employers/educators/medical practices etc. to provide participants with visual instructions on how to access and use their video conferencing software, well in advance of the meeting. These instructions should be available online for whichever software you use. Anyone using them can also find them online if not provided.
3. Wherever possible when video conferencing, participants should speak one at a time, allowing for the time delay. It would be helpful if the person hosting the meeting first says what they have to say/raise the first agenda point (allowing time for participants to make notes). They can then ask each participant in turn (by name) if they have anything to add or question. Other participants should remain quiet while that person speaks, noting comments to raise when it is their turn, or the host a mute them if the software allows. This format should be repeated for each topic/agenda point. If anyone has anything to add at the end, this should be done using the same method as before.
4. All participants should allow the person with APD extra time to process what is said, and time to allow for word retrieval when forming responses. Regular sensory breaks should also be allowed to prevent sensory overload and the meeting paused while this is done.
5. As with phone conversations, participants should speak clearly and use plain language; there is no need to raise their voice (APD does not affect hearing or intelligence). Try not to move your head or sit too far from the screen as this can prevent lipreading and reading facial clues.
6. Always provide a follow-up email to all participants (with or without communication problems) as a record of what was discussed and include any actions needed from each one. This email should include the date and time of the next meeting, if possible, allowing time for the recipient to prepare and complete any requested actions. As before, an email should be sent a day or two before the next meeting, both as a reminder and to include a printable agenda. As with conference calls, the person with APD should not be expected to take notes as these may be incorrect or incomplete due to their APD.

(These are all reasonable adjustments that an employee with APD can request).

C. Examples of video conferencing providers and useful add-ons

- Zoom has introduced subtitles: https://www.meriahnichols.com/how-to-enable-free-zoom-captions/?fbclid=IwAR1G-zAf9w959JQWuRvxMvHPY8OZNuJzoM81nu_vV6Y8U84peZ7nQcEo4Ck
- This might be worth investigating (also Skype, worth looking into various similar internet relay chat providers) although the quality of live subtitles cannot be guaranteed and they would be out of synch with the speech as they must be produced slightly after the speech, causing added problems when lipreading.
- Zoom also has the facility for the host to manage the meeting/chat by muting both individual and multiple participants.
<https://www.etsu.edu/helpdesk/documents/zoom-manage-participants.pdf>
- Microsoft Teams indicates who is speaking, even on a voice call, and the speech is reportedly clearer.

D. The benefits of support - for all

The additional measures listed above might take a little more time and need more preparation and work afterwards, but the result will be a more inclusive environment, therefore improving morale and productivity and lessening stress and anxiety in work and learning. Also, as reasonable adjustments that an employee might request, **they are a legal requirement, not a choice.**

E. Further information

If you have APD, hearing loss, or other conditions that may affect your ability to work to the best of your ability, please consider declaring it and asking for these reasonable adjustments plus any others that you need. You are entitled to them, by law.

**Financial help for provision of equipment for disabled employers and those with certain health conditions is available from the Department for Work and Pensions "Access to Work" scheme. Certain conditions apply.*

<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

Further information about APD is available on the APD Support UK website, plus links to support groups for those affected and their families.

<https://apdsupportuk.yolasite.com/>