



5 ways to focus on what people are saying

You've been there: Someone is talking—you see his mouth moving—but all you hear, Charlie Brown-style, is *wah, wah, wah*. Five experts (including a CEO and a Hollywood screenwriter) share their best strategies for keeping their heads in the conversation.

REPORTING BY Kate Rockwood ILLUSTRATION BY Shout



SUSAN CAIN

Think of someone scary.

When you're in a pressure-filled conversation, your inner voice asks, "Do I sound stupid? Am I gesticulating too much?" Instead of listening to the other person, you're sidetracked, thinking about what you're going to say next. The amygdala—the part of the brain that registers the fear of social rejection—may be firing as well, making it even more difficult to concentrate. It can help to call to mind someone who once intimidated you with her authority or charisma but no longer does. Perhaps you got to know her and realized that she, like everyone, has her foibles. The same thing is true of the person standing before you. You just don't know her shortcomings yet. Remembering that previous experience can have a calming effect.

SUSAN CAIN is the author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. She lives in the Hudson River Valley, in New York.

LARINA KASE

Ask questions.

If you get trapped in a boring talk with a friend or a family member whom you can't escape, the best way to get engaged is to formulate questions in your head. Even though you don't speak them aloud, asking yourself, "What can I learn from this?" or "How can I contribute?" helps you mentally dig in to the topic at hand. Crafting answers to these questions also enables you to do an informal wrap-up at the end of the talk, by saying something along the lines of "It sounds like what's important here is..." Just the accountability of knowing that you'll have to process and condense the main points will keep you focused.

LARINA KASE, Psy.D., is a cognitive behavioral psychologist based in Philadelphia and the author of *The Confident Speaker*.

MELISSA ROSENBERG

Look at your feet.

I've been around actors for 20 years, but often I'll get starstruck—and therefore distracted—when I meet someone for the first time. I recently met with one celebrity whom I've admired for years and found it hard to listen. To stay centered, I used a grounding technique that I learned from a theater and dance teacher years earlier: If you feel like you're having an out-of-body moment, focus your entire mind on your feet. Fixate on the physical sensation of them on the ground and visualize roots shooting down from them into the earth. This simple action connects you to your body and makes you feel present.

MELISSA ROSENBERG is a three-time Emmy-nominated screenwriter who lives in Los Angeles. Her most recent film, *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn, Part 2*, opens this month.

JULIE SMOLYANSKY

Be a parrot.

My dad died of a heart attack when I was 27 years old, and I unexpectedly assumed the reins of our family business. I received a lot of push-back from investors who said, "There's no way a girl can run a publicly traded company." That year, I went into those irritating conversations defensively—not wanting to hear anything that was being said. Ultimately, I realized that I needed to gather opinions, so I practiced a reflective-listening technique—repeating back what the other person said to me in my own words. It helped me to really hear what was being said while also making the speaker feel that I understood exactly what he was saying.

JULIE SMOLYANSKY, the chief executive officer of Lifeway Foods, became the youngest-ever female CEO of a publicly held company when she took the position in 2002. She lives in Chicago.

LEILA JANAH

Walk and talk.

It may sound counterintuitive, but if I know that I'm going to have an intense or frustrating conversation with someone, I'll suggest that we take a walk. That way, you and the other person are side by side instead of facing each other and making eye contact, which can feel more confrontational. Since you and the other party are able to talk more casually, the mood is lightened, putting everyone more at ease.

LEILA JANAH is the founder of Samasource, a nonprofit that sets up impoverished women, youths, and refugees with small computer-based tasks to help build skills. She lives in San Francisco.