

# Building up Communication Confidence

a programme to help young people and adults  
trapped in silence

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## **Building up Communication Confidence**

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### **Who is this for?**

The programme is suitable for people who have associated communication with extreme anxiety in the past, and now routinely experience anxiety when preparing to talk. This is a learnt, habitual response<sup>1</sup> similar to an anxiety or panic attack, which occurs selectively in all but the most familiar situations. When comfortable and relaxed with members of their 'talking circle', the individual communicates completely normally; at other times the anxiety or panic reaction that occurs is so unpleasant that the individual prefers to avoid communication altogether. Like a phobia, this avoidance is a rational response to an irrational, but very real fear. Many sufferers also prefer to avoid treatment as they believe it will involve more of the same discomfort. They tell themselves they will talk one day – when they change school, go to college, find the right job...

### **Rationale behind programme**

The programme uses two anxiety reduction techniques called 'shaping' and 'fading'. Starting small with tasks that do not arouse anxiety, the individual gradually works towards talking without the rush of anxiety that 'full-on' verbal communication usually brings. Once talking to strangers, familiar people of the individual's choice can be 'faded' in until their presence can be tolerated.

At each step, attention is paid to the various components of talking until it is possible to maintain relaxed posture and voice with appropriate eye-contact, timing, and intonation. Some people might consider filming themselves to see which components they particularly need to concentrate on. Others may be aware that only volume is an issue. We cannot force ourselves to *feel* relaxed but we can work on *looking* and *behaving* relaxed. With regular practice this becomes more natural and automatic and we realise we actually *feel* better too.

Support is important, but the programme is initially conducted entirely alone or with strangers who have neither prior expectations nor plans for another meeting – this usually reduces pressure to succeed and makes talking easier.

The regime will be most effective when the individual concerned:

- has a real need and motivation to overcome their difficulties.
- has an understanding of how anxiety was generated originally and then transferred to other, less threatening situations.
- feels in control of the steps taken and pace at which the programme progresses.
- understands that minimal anxiety is involved but is ready to take some small risks in order to change their life<sup>2</sup>.
- has the support of a friend, relative, coach or therapist.

<sup>1</sup> Selective mutism can occur across all cultures and social backgrounds, and is only rarely associated with a history of abuse.

<sup>2</sup> In extreme cases, some individuals may, in consultation with their GP, consider a short course of medication to alleviate anxiety while embarking on the programme.

## Programme Overview

There are three phases to help individuals:

1. Talk to strangers (using the telephone as a stepping-stone)
2. Talk to a familiar person face to face for the first time (starting with routine telephone conversations or 'scripts')
3. Generalise to other familiar people (transferring from the more anonymous 'safety' of strangers in the community to a familiar setting)

Everyone is different with different anxiety triggers and responses. Some people will not need to do the whole of Phase One as they have no difficulty using the phone. Others will find the phone particularly stressful and need to take Phase One very gently at their own pace. Others will value the phone practice more for adjusting their posture, body language and voice projection than for speaking aloud per se.

Some people will be happy to complete Phase One only and start a new life with a new sense of identity in a new community – they have no wish to go back to strike up conversations with people they regard as part of their past. Others will be keen to move onto Phases Two and Three in order to build relationships within their current educational, occupational or residential setting.

The ideas here are therefore intended to be used flexibly and adapted to the needs of the individual.

### **Reference:**

This programme is based on the principles described in the Selective Mutism Resource Manual, Johnson and Wintgens, 2001 (Speechmark Publishing), but is geared towards adults and older adolescents who may prefer to work alone or with a supportive mentor rather than parents/teachers. Nonetheless, many of the sections in the Selective Mutism Resource Manual will make relevant reading and provide suitable extension activities. Readers are referred in particular to:

Frequently Asked Questions, p 15  
Overview of the Treatment Progression, p 117  
The sliding-in technique, p 140  
Communication Load Progression, p 249  
Talking Activities, p 258-269  
Shaping and Lone-talking Programme, p 271

## Phase One: Talking to strangers

1. Talking alone out loud with written script  
(rehearsing steps 2 and 3)  
↓
2. Listening to automated telephone message and responding verbally  
(system operates on voice recognition)  
↓
3. Talking to a stranger on phone - responding verbally in rehearsed routine  
↓
4. Talking to a stranger on phone – making an enquiry in rehearsed routine  
↓
5. Talking to strangers on phone – making an ad hoc enquiry  
↓
6. Talking to strangers in the community – short enquiries  
↓
7. Talking to strangers in the community – longer exchanges  
↓
8. Talking to strangers in the community – take the plunge!

Notes: (\*denotes transcripts found in Appendix)

*N.B. The shaded areas are optional & provide complementary or alternative ideas.*

1	<p>First you need someone to phone &amp; write down some routine telephone prompts e.g. Virgin Trains*, Train-Tracker, brochure requests*, National Rail Enquiries*, Directory Enquiries (but more expensive!). Now practice reading them aloud and filling in the gaps with your own answers until you are comfortable hearing your own voice. If a talking partner is available (e.g. close relative), practice the script with them or tape the prompts, leaving gaps for your responses and play the tape until you can answer on cue with relaxed posture, good volume, and natural intonation.</p> <p>Or you could just listen in while someone else rings and does the talking until you are confident that you know the routine.</p> <p style="background-color: #e0e0e0;">Practice and record a message for your home ansaphone if you have a machine. Even if you are unable to answer the phone, it helps to get used to a) hearing your voice when the ansaphone kicks in, and b) letting others hear your voice.</p>
2	<p>Dial the numbers for any routines you have practiced where you talk to a recorded message rather than a real person (e.g. Virgin Trains*). You will get several chances to respond. Hang up when told you are being transferred to an agent! Practice and practice until you can respond to the machine confidently at normal volume.</p> <p style="background-color: #e0e0e0;">If you share your home, practice a routine for answering the phone. e.g. 'Hello, I'll get Mum' or '892203 – one moment please'. <i>Imagine</i> phone ringing, pick up receiver and say your routine until you can do this without anxiety.</p>

(Phase One Notes: continued)

3	<p>Move onto talking to an actual person and responding to similar routine questions, e.g. National Rail*, Virgin Trains* (the bit after they transfer you to an agent). Repeat the routine checking a different aspect of communication each time – are your hands relaxed? Are you smiling? Does your voice sound light and friendly? Did you say hello, please, thank you and goodbye? Move on when you are managing all these without anxiety. Don't forget you are in control and can always hang up without causing offence – they will assume it was a bad signal or telephone line.</p>
	<p>Make it a personal target to answer the phone next time it rings. Say the line you have practiced <i>as soon as you pick up</i>, then get your parent or flatmate.</p>
4	<p>As above but you will be taking more initiative and asking the agent a question. You may prefer to listen to someone else making the same call first, or to practice on your own for a while. Stick to calls with a single Q and A. e.g. Restaurants/hotels - ask for directions or if they have a vegetarian menu or car-parking facilities. Shops – do they sell a particular item? Theatre – check date of forthcoming production. Holiday companies – request a brochure*.</p>
5	<p>As above but more complex enquiries needing a short dialogue. e.g. Restaurants/hotels – ask if they can do a certain dish on request. Town council – where are nearest recycling facilities, swimming pool or library, what can be done about a wasps nest in the garden? Motor insurance - get a quote. Order a Chinese take-away. Having practised and succeeded with bogus requests, you can start making more useful calls – you may even find yourself able to talk on the phone to friends or relatives you haven't been able to speak to before.</p>
6	<p>By now you have been conversing easily and fluently with many strangers so it will be only a small step to doing it face to face in the community. Practice aloud at home first. Then pick settings where you will feel most comfortable – some people prefer a noisy background e.g. supermarket or station, some an empty shop or cafe, others a pedestrian on a quiet street where they will not be overheard by other people. Pick a simple question so you can leave (with a smile!) as soon as you've got your answer. e.g. ask for a 1st-class stamp, a cup of tea, directions to the pub, the time of the next train, where the magazines are. You will need to start by making eye-contact and saying 'Excuse me'. Be prepared to repeat yourself if you are not heard the first time. Repeat until you are happy with your volume and body language. Gradually tackle venues where there are more people around and more possibility of being overheard.</p>
7	<p>As above but pick more complex enquiries which will take longer to complete. e.g. ordering several items of food, asking times and prices of train tickets, asking how to join the library/leisure centre/art-class/video-store, finding out difference between 2 computer games/food brands.</p>
8	<p>If you have got this far, well done! You know you are only one step away from opening a bank account, enquiring about holiday vacancies, applying for a job, joining an evening class or local interest group, volunteering your services in the community, booking a holiday, going for a test-drive..... Good Luck!</p>

## Phase Two: Transferring to a known person

9. Back to steps 2 or 3 with a new talking partner overhearing  
(can introduce this from step 5 onwards if prefer not to wait until end of Phase One)



10. New talking partner replaces telephone in steps 1-5



11. New scripts with new talking partner



12. Repeat step 11 in other settings



13. Back to steps 6 and 7 accompanied by new talking partner

Or move on to Phase 3

### Notes:

	Precede with shaded areas from Phase one if this feels 'easier'.
9	Choose someone non-threatening, someone you've always wanted to speak to, someone who would be a good ally on the programme etc. If you cannot manage the phone-calls with this person in the same room as you, have them wait outside the room while you make a call. Repeat with them standing at the door, and again with the door slightly open. Finally, make the call and keep going while they ease into the room. Once you can maintain natural volume and posture, repeat until you can tolerate them sitting close to you. This leads to the next step where you repeat the conversation with the new talking partner taking the place of the phone. This technique is called 'fading in'.
	Arrange to leave a message on a friend, relative or colleague's mobile phone for them to listen to later. This might be a response to a question they have left on your phone or post-it-note.
10	Do not feel you have to make eye-contact straightaway. This is much easier if you sit side by side and read from your scripts (the documented telephone calls). Gradually work towards looking at your partner as you come to the end of each answer you give them. It is very unnatural to hold eye-contact through an entire conversation. We tend to <b>watch</b> as we listen (this lets the other person know they have our attention), <b>look away</b> as we answer (this helps us think), periodically <b>look back</b> (to check they are listening) and <b>hold gaze</b> as we finish speaking (this lets our partner know it's their turn again).
11	Plan and practice some straightforward 'conversations' like giving answers to a magazine quiz or questions on a form, providing facts about your family or favourite topic, playing Hangman, I-spy or ordering from a menu.
12	Later you will be able to have more 'personal' conversations like sharing your likes and dislikes, and expressing opinions, reasons and explanations. But first try to repeat the more straightforward conversations or verbal games in more public places, gradually allowing your voice to be overheard by others.
	Answer the home/office phone as before but add 'Who's speaking please?' before handing over to a relative/colleague. Later add 'OK' or 'Thank you'.
13	This is useful because sometimes we get embarrassed not by the act of talking to other people, but by what people we know will think when they see us doing so. Make sure you <b>both</b> do some talking however or it will feel unnatural – as if you are on trial! You also have the option of transferring to Phase Three at this point if your priority is to increase your talking circle.

### Phase Three: Transferring to other known people

14. Repeat step 9, 10, or 11 with a second person overhearing



15. Repeat step 9, 10, or 11 with second person taking part



16. Repeat step 15 without original talking partner present



17. Repeat step 12 with new partner

Or

18. Use either talking partner to help build confidence in familiar settings

#### Notes:

	Use the phone to make arrangements with anyone in your talking circle, old or new. Think of some people you would like to speak to – would you find it easier to speak to them over the phone rather than face to face? If this seems likely, ask someone (write them a note or email to explain) to ring you at a certain time to ask you a prearranged question to begin with. Once you've spoken to them on the phone a few times it will be much easier face to face.
14	Each time a new person is introduced it gets easier to fade them in because your old anxiety response is decreasing. You will find you need fewer steps to feel comfortable with them overhearing you, and you will need to pay less attention to your body-language as it is all starting to feel more natural. Spontaneous conversation becomes possible when suddenly you realise that the anxiety has gone completely.
15	Some people are able to miss out step 14 and go straight to 15 – you will know what you are ready for.
16	Fading out your original partner lets you know you are not dependent on them for your confidence.
17	This step may again be useful (see Note 13).
18	Having built your confidence in new surroundings with strangers, you may wish to apply the same principles in more familiar venues e.g. school, college or workplace. Start by talking to one of your talking partners face to face or on the phone, in public places such as a corridor or canteen so that you get used to other people being around when you talk. Then use your talking partners to fade in other people of your choosing. For example let the new person hear you talking, reading or counting aloud together and then gradually join in. You can even fade people in <i>on your own</i> if you give them clear instructions. You will probably find you have little difficulty with anyone <i>new</i> ; it is the people you have known for ages who make you feel extra self-conscious.  Many people miss out this step if they know they are going to be leaving the current establishment. It makes better sense to take your new found confidence and focus on the next phase or project.

# Appendix – Telephone scripts

Just a few examples are listed here – more ideas are welcome! Please note that these scripts are correct at the time of writing but subject to change.

**RM** = Recorded message   **N** = name of individual participating in programme  
**A** = Telephone operator or Agent      ***Italics*** = *action* rather than speech

## **Steps 1 and 2 – Talking alone (rehearsing), and giving answers to voice-recognition machine**

### **Virgin Trains – Telesales** (Local rate 08457 222333)

RM: Thank you for calling Virgin Trains (followed by news flash).  
Welcome to the Virgin Trains Sales Centre. Please speak your journey requirements to this voice recognition system. Your options are to:

- 'Buy tickets'
- 'Get fares'
- 'Check timetables' (sometimes 'fares & timetables' are listed together)
- 'Change or enquire about an existing booking'
- 'Cancel you journey.'

### **Option 1**

N: 'Buy tickets' (see below for 'Get fares')

RM: This requires a current debit or credit card. Do you have your card ready?

N: Yes

RM: Which train journey do you require? For example, London to Manchester.

N: (Speaks journey of choice 'A to B')

RM: Thank you. What day do you wish to travel?

N: (Says a day of the week or a specific date)

RM: What time do you wish to travel? If you are not sure you can say morning, afternoon or evening.

N: (Says time e.g. 4 o'clock or 'morning', 'afternoon' or 'evening').

RM: Is that 4 o'clock in the morning or the afternoon?

N: afternoon



RM: Thank you. Do you require a return ticket?

N: Yes

RM: (repeats questions to ascertain day and time of travel)

N: (answers as above to provide day and time)

RM: How many adults will be travelling?

N: (Says a number)

RM: Any children?

N: Yes/No

RM: How many?

N: (Says a number)

RM: Do you have a railcard?

N: Yes/No

RM: (If 'Yes' to above question) What kind?

N: Network Card/Young Persons Railcard etc.

RM: Thank you. I will now transfer you to an agent.

N: *Hang up!*

## **Option 2**

N: 'Get fares/check fares'

RM: Which train journey do you require? For example, London to Manchester.

N: (Speaks journey of choice 'A to B')

(script continues exactly as for Option 1)

## **Train-tracker** (Local rate 0871 2004950)

Very similar to the Virgin Telesales scripts – very user-friendly and good for practising increased volume as the robot seems to be a bit hard of hearing!

**Steps 1 and 3 – Talking alone (rehearsing), and giving answers to actual person (routine script).**

**(i) Virgin Trains – Telesales** (Local rate 08457 222333)

Go through voice recognition system as in Steps 1 and 2, but select 'Get fares' rather than 'Buy tickets'. This time do not hang up when you are transferred to an agent.

Once connected, the agent will repeat the information back to you in the same order to make sure the voice recognition system has understood you correctly. Say 'Yes' if correct and 'No' if not. You will be asked to repeat anything which is wrong – the date, time of journey, adult or child fare, railcards etc.

Finally you will be given a price.

N: Thank you (*hang up*).

**(ii) National Rail Enquiries** (Local rate 08457 484950)

After a recorded message and latest news you will be transferred immediately to an agent.

A: What station are you travelling from? **OR** 'What journey are you making?'

N: (Say name of station/town/place of own choosing **OR** 'From A to B')

A: (if appropriate) Where are you travelling to?

N: (Say name of station/town/place of own choosing)

A: What day?

N: (Say today/tomorrow/Saturday/date etc.)

A: What time?

N: (Say time)

A: (if appropriate) Is that morning or afternoon?

N: (Say time of day)

A: (Gives time of train departure – and usually the arrival time)

N: Thank you. Bye. (*Hang up*)

**Step 1 and 4– Talking alone (rehearsing), and asking stranger a question (routine script).**

**(i) National Rail Enquiries** (Local rate 08457 484950)

Repeat the Step 4 routine above but now add a question.

e.g. Can you give me the train after/before that too/  
What time's the last train of the day?  
Are first class seats available?  
Can you take a bicycle on that train?

**(ii) Brochure request** (e.g. Crystal Holidays 0870 165 0125, Superbreak 01904 679999)

You will usually be put straight through to an agent rather than select options.

A: How can I help?

N: I'd like to request a brochure please.

A: Which one?

N: (From Crystal choose either Croatia /Italy /France /Lakes and Mountains /Cities /Active /Grand Prix **OR** from Superbreak choose UK Short breaks/ Luxury Hotels/ European Cities/ Self-catering in Europe).

The agent will now ask for your address, usually starting with your postcode, and telephone number.

A: OK, that should be with you in 5-7 days.

N: Thank you. Bye. (*Hang up*)

N.B. Other questions you **may** need to answer particularly if phoning Crystal:

Do you want more than one brochure?  
Can they contact you by email/mobile/fax with further information?  
How did you hear about them?  
Would you book a holiday direct through them or go through an agent?  
When are you thinking of travelling?

Rehearse answers to these so that you don't get caught out!

Increasingly you will find yourself coping with anything that's thrown at you, but if you freeze here are some stock phrases worth practising:

**Can you repeat that please? I'm not sure. Sorry I don't understand.  
I'll ring back later!**