

Strategies for Maintaining Eye Contact

Often, if we are not used to it, maintaining eye contact can be stressful. You may not know where to start when attempting to make eye contact with someone. That's why we've provided some tips and tricks to use when you're having trouble with eye contact.

- **Start making eye contact before you start talking to the person:**
Look at them before you address them, that way you don't have to think about it while you are talking to them.
- **Glance to the side if you need to break eye contact:**
Try maintaining eye contact for 4-5 seconds. A good rule of thumb is to hold your gaze for as long as it takes to register the shape and color of their eyes. Briefly look to the side before resuming eye contact.
- **Use the 50/70 rule:**
Maintain eye contact 50% of the time while talking and 70% of the time while listening.
- **Try to look away slowly:**
If you need to look away, do so slowly. If you look away too quickly, it can look like you are scared or timid.
- **Use the triangle technique:**
Imagine the person's face within an inverted triangle connecting their eyes and mouth. Slowly rotate your eyes between the different points on their face so that you are not just focusing on their eyes.

There are also techniques you can try at home to help you practice in a more comfortable and realistic setting. Building up your confidence through *exposure therapy* can be helpful if making eye contact is more difficult for you.

Exposure therapy is a method that focuses on building up an individual's confidence to the feared situation by exposing them to less frightening situations.

When practicing eye contact, this natural progression can be achieved through:

1. **Starting by talking to yourself in the mirror:** First, practice maintaining eye contact in the mirror. Study your expressions and act as if you are engaging in a conversation with a friend or colleague. As you talk, pay attention to how you naturally respond and focus on trying to keep your gaze directly in the mirror, with slight shifts in gaze. Take note of any gestures or expressions that may make the other person uncomfortable or uneasy.
Try the techniques suggested above and reflect on which one feels the most natural for you.

2. **Next, practice with a close family member or friend:** Print out a copy of this worksheet for the other person or send it to them. Practice each one of the techniques that are suggested in this worksheet and see which one they find to be the most natural and effective for you. Make a game out of it if you need to, this should be fun! Then, get them to use a timer and time you while you are talking to them using your selected technique to see how long you are maintaining eye contact for. Don't get discouraged if you don't get it right immediately, this is a difficult transition!

3. **Last, practice with a stranger:** But don't tell them you are practicing! Keep the tips you have learned in mind and next time when you encounter a new person, do your best to incorporate them. Take note of the person's behavior and facial expressions while they are talking to you. When the conversation is over, reflect on what pieces of the conversation went well and what you can continue to work on for next time.

Gabriella Lancia, PhD