



Silence Tip Sheet

9 Types of Silence

Module 1: The Science of Learning and the Role of the Coach

Topic: Coaching Presence

When you choose how to use your silence, you can align with, shift, and possibly transform the thinking of the person you are with. You must consciously choose how you are holding your stillness. Some of the 9 types of silence can hurt your connection with others more than help it.

For example, choosing not to speak when your brain is full of chatter is a kind of silence that can be disruptive. You aren't present. You are biting your tongue until you can state what is on your mind. Others feel your impatient energy. They may yield the floor to you knowing you have something you are anxious to share or they may just avoid eye contact with you to keep you silent.

When in a conversation, especially a difficult one, you want to be aware of the silence you are holding. Is your silence alert and full of curiosity? Or are you just waiting to end what you think is a dead-end discourse? Are you open to receiving what your partner is expressing so you can share what you see and hear for clarification? Or are you just waiting for the opportunity to state your opinion?

9 Types of Silence and How You Use Them

Novelist, poet, playwright, and psychotherapist Paul Goodman identified 9 kinds of silence in his classic book, *Speaking and Language*. Here is his list with my interpretation of how the silence might impact your conversations.

- 1. Dumb silence of slumber or apathy.** Do you have nothing to say because you don't care? Their words are bouncing off you like a wall.
- 2. Sober silence that goes with a solemn animal face.** Have you given up being a part of the conversation and just listening because you feel you have to? You may feel like a prisoner until you are released.
- 3. Noisy silence of resentment.** The judgment you have for the speaker is so loud in your head you don't hear what is being said.
- 4. Baffled silence of confusion.** You aren't sure of the intention of the conversation, the meaning of the words, or the direction the story is going. You are reluctant to say anything because the speaker might not take your feedback well.
- 5. Musical silence that accompanies absorbed activity.** Whether you are alone or with others, you are so immersed in what you are doing that it feels as if the world is silent around you.
- 6. The silence of peaceful accord with other persons or communion with the cosmos.** The [science of awe and wonder](#) reveals a beautiful combination of peace and curiosity when we feel a sense of oneness with what we see. We quietly accept the unknown but want to know more.
- 7. Fertile silence of awareness.** What is being revealed has your head spinning. Are the thoughts arising from what you are curious about now or from what you think you now know? Observations and questions arising from your curiosity can further the conversation. Sharing what you think you now know might shut it down.
- 8. Alive silence of alert perception.** Are you noticing everything in your visual sphere? Acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton said, "Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything."
- 9. The silence of listening to whole person you are with.** When you are silent but focused on the other, you can catch the drift of their meaning from their words, their expressions, and the energy they radiate. This is how you cultivate [non-reactive empathy](#). You not only understand their experience, you are then able to reflect what you hear and notice to help the other person assess their thinking. This is an alive silence but not intrusive. This is the silence most useful to effective coaching and leadership conversations, and probably parenting as well.

Can You WAIT?

There is an acronym used in training for many years, WAIT –Why Am I Talking? Whether you are speaking out loud or allowing your brain to fill your head with words, ask yourself if silence would be more useful and what type of silence you want to hold.

Kahlil Gibran wrote in his 1923 classic *The Prophet*, “There are those among you who seek the talkative through fear of being alone.” You can help people feel connected with your silence. They will come to feel safe with you, willing to reveal what is on their minds that they do not understand. Your curiosity and care can help them come to a new understanding filled with possibility. Gibran called this way of being with people, “rhythmic silence.” I believe this silence is what we hold when we are practicing Coaching Presence.

Alive, focused silence is a skill we can all develop. Find a moment to practice today.