

Too Quiet or Too Loud

How to Speak and Be Heard

1. *Volume Variation*. When you are alone, experiment with your volume potential to see what you're capable of. Without straining your vocal muscles, say the phrase "I feel fine" as if you're speaking to someone three feet away, at the other end of a long conference table, a room away from you, and then half a block away.

2. *Enlist a friend or colleague to be your coach* for a five-minute conversation across a medium-sized table. Tell her to signal a need for greater volume by raising an index finger. Do the same exercise with your eyes closed to help you develop a feel for your ideal volume. This time your coach can signal with a verbal cue such as "volume" or "more." Ask your coach to note any pattern of inaudible volume: You might have a habit of lowering your volume at the beginning or end of sentences or when you're speaking about yourself.

3. *Advanced level*. Repeat the previous exercise with a radio or TV playing in the background. This will help you adjust volume for a noisier environment.

4. *You want the support for volume* to come from a relaxed, open throat; breathing focused in the abdominal area; and a mouth kept as open as possible as you speak. Observe and evaluate those checkpoints as you project the following phrases with adequate volume to a spot in the room ten feet away:

"My throat is relaxed."

"I'm breathing deeply and relaxed."

"My voice is filling my mouth."

To Adjust Your Volume Control

1. *Test it out*. Since poor ability to monitor and control volume could be an effect of hearing loss, rule out this possibility first via an audiological screening. Consult your family doctor, an ear, nose, and throat specialist, or an audiologist to schedule a hearing test.

2. *Tune in*. If your hearing is normal, ask a colleague or friend to help you discover your best conversational volume by signaling when your decibel level becomes deafening. Bring a tape recorder to a meeting and note how your volume compares to that of others.

3. *Try it on*. Contrast different volumes by saying words and phrases at various settings: softer than average, average, loud, and very loud.

Single words: "Why, now, go, bye."

Phrases: "Is this loud? I can control my volume."

Remember that your "soft" may be everyone else's "normal," and so on. Your goal is to begin to develop a sensitivity to the range of volumes and an internal sense that lets you know when it's time to tone down.

4. *Take it around*. Use your new, softer volume in routine situations, such as answering the telephone, greeting people, making a request. Notice people's reactions. If your listeners used to cringe and now you get no reaction, that's an excellent sign.