



MUTE

Overtalkers are everywhere—
but saying less will get you more

BY DAN LYONS

THE WORLD IS FILLED WITH OVERTALKERS. YOU RUN INTO THEM ALL THE TIME.

They're that pest at the office who destroys every Monday by recounting each unremarkable thing they did over the weekend. They're that jerk who talks over everyone else at a dinner party while the rest of you fantasize about slipping hemlock into their pinot noir. They're the neighbor who drops in uninvited and spends an hour telling you stories you've already heard, the arrogant know-it-all who interrupts colleagues in meetings, the CEO whose reckless tweet gets him charged with securities fraud. And don't get me started on the British prince who incessantly uses the press to spread his message criticizing the press.

To be honest, they're most of us, too.

It's not entirely our fault. We live in a world that doesn't just encourage overtalking but practically demands it, where success is measured by how much attention we can attract: get a million Twitter followers, become an Instagram influencer, make a viral video, give a TED talk. We are inundated with YouTube, social media, chat apps, streaming services. Did you know there are more than 2 million podcasts, which have produced 48 million episodes? Or that more than 3,000 TEDx events take place every year, with up to 20 wannabe Malcolm Gladwells participating in each one? Or that Americans sit through more than a billion meetings a year, but think that half are a complete waste of time? We're tweeting for the sake of tweeting, talking for the sake of talking.

Yet many of the most powerful and successful people do the exact opposite. Instead of seeking attention, they hold back. When they do speak, they're careful about what they say. Apple CEO Tim Cook lets awkward pauses hang during conversations. For four decades, Joe Biden was the King of Gaffes, but in 2020 he found the campaign-trail discipline to keep his voice low and his answers short, to pause before speaking and give boring answers; now he's President. Albert Einstein was an introvert who cherished solitude. The late Ruth

Bader Ginsburg chose her words so carefully and took such painfully long pauses that her clerks developed a habit they called "the Two-Mississippi Rule": finish what you're saying and then count "one Mississippi ... two Mississippi" before you speak again. The Justice was not ignoring you; she was thinking ... very ... deeply ... about how to respond.

Most of us will not get appointed to the Supreme Court or become tech billionaires, but we can prevail in our own day-to-day battles. Buying a new car or house? Hoping to move up the ladder at work? Trying to win friends and influence people? Learn how to shut the F up.

MEN, IN PARTICULAR, are the champions of overtalking—and talking over. We bulldoze. We hog the floor. We mansplain, maninterrupt, and deliver manalogues. To me, this is a personal problem. I'm an inveterate overtalker, and it has cost me dearly. The issue is not only that I talk too much; it's that I have never been able to resist blurting out inappropriate things, and I can't keep my opinions to myself.

Once, when I put my foot in my mouth at work, I lost my job and the promise of millions of dollars. Worse, my lack of conversational impulse control led to a separation from my wife, and nearly cost me my marriage. It was then, living alone in a rented house, away from my wife and kids, that I conducted what members of Alcoholics Anonymous call a "searching and fearless moral inventory" of myself, and acknowledged that in ways big and small, overtalking was interfering with my life. This sent me on a search to find the answers to two questions: Why are some people compulsive talkers? And how can we fix it?

Early on in my process, I discovered there's a word for my problem: *talkaholism*, a term coined by a pair of communication-studies scholars to describe a form of extreme overtalking. They created

a self-scored questionnaire to identify people who suffer from the condition (find the quiz at time.com/talk).

I got 50 points on the Talkaholic Scale, the highest possible score. My wife Sasha gave me the same 50 points and probably wished she could give me more. This was not unexpected, but according to Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McCroskey, the West Virginia University researchers who developed the test in 1993, this might be cause for concern. They described talkaholism as an addiction, and said that while a talkaholic's gift with words can help them advance in their careers, their inability to rein in their overtalking can lead to personal and professional difficulties. Check, check, and check.

Talkaholics cannot just wake up one day and choose to talk less. Their talking is compulsive. They don't talk just a little bit more than everyone else, but a lot more, and they do this all the time, in every context or setting, even when they know that other people think they talk too much. And here is the gut punch: talkaholics continue to talk even when they know that what they are about to say is going to hurt them. They simply cannot stop.

"That's me," I said to Sasha. "Right? That's totally me."

"I've been telling you this for years," she said.

We were sitting in the kitchen. Our kids—15-year-old twins—weren't home. Memories flew around in my brain, times when I blurted out something off-color at a party, or embarrassed the kids by talking someone's ear off, or regaled them with unsolicited advice instead of asking them how they were or what they needed. "Danalogues," we called them, and we would all laugh and pretend it was funny—"You know how Dad loves to talk!" But now, looking at these test results in black-and-white, I didn't feel like laughing. I felt embarrassed. And worried.

MY SEARCH FOR ANSWERS brought me to Michael Beatty, a professor who once worked with Richmond and McCroskey and now teaches at the University of Miami. Richmond told me Beatty

was the best person to talk to about the research that had been done since the Talkaholic Scale was introduced.

"It's biology," Beatty told me when we got on the phone. "It's all nature, not nurture. It starts to develop prenatally." Twenty years ago, he pioneered a field called communibiology, which studies communication as a biological phenomenon. Instead of teaching courses in journalism and public speaking, the traditional business of a university communication department, he collaborated with neuroscientists, giving study participants EEGs to measure their brain waves and sticking them into fMRI machines to watch their brains light up when they looked at pictures or listened to audio recordings.

A lot of communication researchers thought he was going down a blind alley, but Beatty was sure he was right. "To me, it would be weird if the way we communicate was not related to the brain," he said. "We just didn't know how."

In 2010, Beatty and his colleagues discovered that talkativeness is linked to brain-wave imbalances. Specifically, it's about the balance between neuron activity in the left and right lobes in the anterior region of the prefrontal cortex. Ideally, the left and right lobe should have about the same amount of neuronal activity when a person is at rest. If there's an asymmetry—if your left side is more active than the right—you're likely to be

shy. If the right side is more active, you're likely to be talkative. The greater the imbalance, the further out on the talkativeness spectrum you will tend to be. A talkaholic's right lobe will fire a ton while the left side barely flickers.

"It's all about impulse control," Beatty told me. The brain imbalances he studies have also been shown to correspond to aggression and "your ability to assess how a plan might unfold and what the consequences will be."

The right-dominant lack of impulse control, the same factor that might make it so hard to zip your lips, often plays out in the workplace. "If I'm right-side dominant and I'm a CEO, and I'm in a meeting where some employee starts saying dumb things,



I'm not going to be polite. I'm going to get angry and tell him to shut up," Beatty said.

Unfortunately, Beatty, Richmond, and McCroskey all came to the same conclusion in their research: a talkaholic can't just quit. After all, Beatty argues, you can't simply zap your neurons back into balance. "It's not completely deterministic, but there's very little room to change who you are," he told me.

THIS, OF COURSE, was not the answer I wanted to hear. I wanted to be a better spouse, parent, and friend. I wanted to stop dreading social events and mitigate my risk of blowing up my job. There might not be a cure for talkaholism, but there's also no cure for alcoholism—and yet some alcoholics develop the discipline to stop drinking.

I couldn't afford a speech coach. I couldn't find any online courses that teach you how to stop overtalking. So, after connecting with Beatty, I struck out on my own, interviewing dozens of people who, in one way or another, are experts on speech: historians, social scientists, political scientists, communication professors, executive coaches, psychologists. Some research suggests that silence might help us grow new brain cells, so I went "forest bathing" in the Berkshires. I took an online listening course. A psychologist in California shared with me the techniques she teaches to prisoners to help them keep their mouths shut during parole hearings and nontalk their way out of prison—methods that I hoped would help me break free from my compulsion.

Armed with theory, advice, and exercises, I developed guidelines for myself and started practicing them. I bailed out of social media almost entirely. I trained myself to become comfortable with uncomfortable silences. Before picking up the phone or getting on a Zoom call, I took deep breaths to slow myself down, using the heart-rate monitor on my Apple Watch to see whether this was working, and jotting down notes on the purpose of the conversation so I could stick to the agenda. During the call, I would lower my voice and slow my cadence. I attached a piece of paper to the wall above my computer screen with admonishments in 60-point type: "QUIET! LISTEN! SHORT ANSWERS! WRAP IT UP!" I asked my kids open-ended questions, then sat back and let

them speak. Officially speaking, we were "having a talk," but in truth, I was having a listen.

FOR MOST OF US, talking is like breathing. You don't think about it; you just do it. But when you start paying attention to how you speak, this leads you to think about why you speak the way you do. You're forcing yourself to become conscious of something that usually happens unconsciously. Now you're doing the kind of work you might do with meditation or psychotherapy. You're turning your attention inward. You're engaging in self-reflection and self-examination. You're figuring out who you are.

Gradually, I began to develop more discipline, and as I did, something extraordinary happened: I started to feel better, both emotionally and physically. I'm not perfect, and I can't always adhere to my own rules—but when I do, the results are magical. I feel calmer, less anxious, and more in control, which makes me less likely to overtalk. It's a positive feedback loop: the less I talk, the less I talk.

Better yet, I see the effect on the people around me. My marriage is stronger than ever. My daughter and I sit on the porch in the evening and have long conversations filled with laughter. If you are the parent of a high-school-age kid, you know how miraculous this feels. She tells me her dreams and what she thinks she might want to do with her life. She tells me about her fears and doubts. Instead of trying to solve her problems, I listen. Inevitably, she works her way around to solving them herself and concludes that she is going to be all right and that she knows what she needs to do. I discover that she has never felt confident playing Mozart and Haydn on the piano, and that now that she is going to a summer camp where she will have to play Haydn in a trio, she's freaking out. She fears she might not be able to do it, but at the same time, she would rather try and fail than chicken out. I discover that I don't just admire her, but that I'm inspired by her.

I hear her—I hear all the people in my life who matter deeply to me, and now, when I do speak, they're ready to listen.

Lyons is the author of STFU: The Power of Keeping Your Mouth Shut in an Endlessly Noisy World, from which this essay is adapted

HOW TO STOP OVERTALKING

1

WHEN POSSIBLE, SAY NOTHING

Pretend words are money, and spend them wisely. Be Dirty Harry, not Prince Harry.

2

MASTER THE POWER OF THE PAUSE

Take a breath. Wait. Let the other person process what you've said.

3

QUIT SOCIAL MEDIA

The first cousin of overtalking is overtweeting. If you can't quit completely, at least dial it way back.

4

SEEK OUT SILENCE

Detach. Unplug. Giving your brain a rest can kick-start your creativity.

5

LEARN HOW TO LISTEN

Instead of just hearing someone, practice active listening. Pay fierce attention to the other person.

© TIME USA, LLC. All rights reserved. No part of this material may be duplicated or disseminated without permission.