Embrace the Awkward Silence

June 08, 2023

At this point, Julie Boland is resigned to awkward silences. She’s a psychology and linguistics professor at the University of Michigan, and like many of us, she’s been spending a lot of time on Zoom calls over the past few years—and seemingly always dealing with internet lags and people fumbling to mute and unmute their mic. When there’s a pause, no one seems to know whose turn it is to speak. It helps, at least somewhat, that Boland knows the reason these breaks tend to feel cringey: They disrupt the conversational volley of call-and-response that usually comes to people naturally. We are alert to the moment rhythm ruptures, like when someone loses the beat in a karaoke performance.

Uncomfortable silences have always existed, but in many ways, they’re harder to avoid today than ever before. We interact with both strangers and acquaintances—with whom we’re likely to have some clumsy back-and-forths—at a rate that would have been unheard-of before people flooded to cities and travel grew far easier. And now modern communication technologies such as Zoom, Boland’s research suggests, beget particularly inelegant conversations. It doesn’t help that many of us exited pandemic lockdown to find that our social skills had atrophied. Though awkward silences are an inherent part of daily life, people really wish they could escape them: Abundant books, YouTube explainers, and wikiHow tutorials advise people on how to keep conversation flowing uninterrupted at parties, in meetings, or on first dates.

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