

STAMMINA



SILENCE ON THE LINE



RESPONDING TO SILENCE ON THE PHONE

Many organisations have routines that they follow when people taking calls can't hear or can't understand the person on the other end of the line. You might think it's a bad line, or that the person is distracted. However, such routines often mean that people who stammer are interrupted, talked over or even hung up on, particularly at the beginning of calls.

People who stammer make at least 43 million calls to businesses and organisations each year. A 2025 survey of 356 people who stammer found that 14% of them were hung up on during their most recent call to a business or organisation, whilst 31% of them were interrupted or talked over*.

It's normal for people who stammer to need time to get their talking started at the beginning of a call. So, if your process is to say 'Hello' three times and then hang up if you think it's a bad line, you could well be hanging up on someone who stammers. Or, if you keep saying, "I can't hear you, are you still there?" when someone is working hard to say their name, they then have to stop and decide whether to keep saying their name, or to try to answer your latest question. None of that makes it easy for your caller.

Below you'll find two outline scripts you can consider for dealing with silence or a suspected 'bad line' during a phone call. These approaches create time and space for people who stammer or who have other speech disabilities and differences to talk to you. You can use these approaches or take them as inspiration and adapt them to your setting.

Don't hang up. Hang on.

"Sometime I just can't say a word, or need 5-10 seconds to say it. And the person on the other end thinks that it's a bad line and hangs up."

"Not only do you feel so embarrassed and frustrated, but you also have to go through the ordeal of calling back, explaining who you are again and that you were hung up on."

"I couldn't say my name the first time for quite a while and they put the phone down and the second time they asked me a lot of questions that I struggled to answer fluently and I had to get a family member to advocate for me and take the phone on my behalf."



THE INFORMAL APPROACH

Don't jump in with lots of extra questions if you're not sure if someone is there or if they can hear you. Instead, create space for the caller.

Say something like, *"Take all the time you need. I'm listening"*.

That can signal to your caller that you're giving them time to get the words out.

If, after 30 seconds, you haven't heard anything from your caller, it's OK to move towards ending the call, but make sure you explain that. For example, you can say something like,

"I'm not sure if you're there and want to talk to us or not. I'm going to finish the call now, but you're very welcome to call us back. If the phone is difficult for you and you'd prefer to chat in a different way, you can also contact us by (outline alternative contact methods). Thank you for calling and we really hope to chat with you next time. Bye."

Then end the call.

A STRUCTURED APPROACH

You	<i>"Welcome to [your company's name]. How can we help?"</i>
	Silent or occasional sounds.
	Wait at least 15 seconds, then...
You	<i>"I know it's difficult for some people to start speaking on the phone. I can't hear you at the moment, but I'm happy to wait."</i>
	Silent or occasional sounds.
	After another 30 seconds...
You	<i>"I can't hear you and I'm not sure if you can hear me or not. If you'd like me to stay on the line, can you tap on your phone twice, just so that I know you're there?"</i>
	If caller taps twice, you know to keep waiting and repeat the cycle one more time. If no tap OR if the caller still hasn't spoken after you've been through the cycle twice, wait another 20 seconds and then say something like...
You	<i>"I'm not sure if you're there and want to talk to us or not. I'm going to finish the call now, but you're very welcome to call us back. If the phone is difficult for you and you'd prefer to chat in a different way, you can also contact us by (outline alternative contact methods). Thank you for calling and we really hope to chat with you next time. Bye."</i>
	End the call.

STAMMA

stamma.org

Registered charity nos 1089967/SC038866