

Transcript Episode 2: Getting Established in a New Place

Introduction: Whether you consider yourself socially awkward or the life of the party, being able to read the social cues around you and navigate Real-Life interactions is vital for your work or school performance and with your personal interactions,

Adulting – Thinking of all the things adults have to do can be intimidating. Maybe you are realizing just how much you don't know about living on your own.

If this sounds familiar, join us today to learn the skills you need and take some of the stress out of being an adult.

This is Grown Up U, an adulting podcast to help you navigate the twists and turns of adult life. Listen and get life skills you didn't learn in school.

Alison Crane: Today we are going to talk about some of the top tips for reading social cues, as well as how our social interactions can be improved.

I'm Alison Crane, family and consumer sciences agent with the Garland County Extension Service, and I am glad to welcome our special guest today, Conner Shipmen. Conner graduated high school during 2020. And as many of you remember, that was a very interesting year for most high school seniors.

Conner, we're glad to have you join us today.

Conner: Glad to be here.

Alison: Well, Connor, tell us a little bit about yourself in particular with our topic. How would you describe yourself socially?

Conner: Well, like you said, I graduated class of 2020. So, you know, our social cues and the abstractness of that was kind of skewed as we were all sent out of the school setting and directly into a you're in a quarantine or you must be six feet away from each other, stay away. So, it kind of messed with me a lot because I'm a very shy and very nervous person when it comes to speaking.

And now that I'm six feet away from you and we're behind masks, I can't hear you very well.

And I just have problems initiating conversations anyway. So now I can't hear you properly and we're just having problems all over now.

Alison: Covid has definitely created some issues with our abilities to read and understand people's social cues.

Typically, when you think of social cues, deficits for children and adults, some of the typical social skills deficits include difficulty initiating interactions, responding to those interactions from other people, maintaining eye contact or even sharing enjoyment in social events or reading non-verbal cues with others, also being able to see things from another person's perspective.

Have you experienced any of those difficulties sometimes?

Conner: Yeah, I actually have a lot of problems, like I said, with initiating the conversation, because I'm... I'm shy. So if you don't come up to me and you're like, hey, how are you doing? I'm just going to kind of sit back. You know, it comes a lot out when you're in a group setting with a lot of people, because I'm normally that guy who's seen in the back of the room just kind of watching what's all going around and trying to figure out a way to get into it and then just never do.

Alison: Well, Conner, I know my kids, and you are the same age as my kids, oftentimes, they have described themselves as socially awkward. Have you ever felt socially awkward?

Conner: Oh, all the time. (they laugh)

Alison: Well, we've all had that from time to time. And then there are some people who fall in the Autism Spectrum Disorder. They might even experience that social awkwardness more. And in school settings, they get training oftentimes to eliminate some of the problems. But once you're an adult and you're in the work environment, you often don't have that extra help to navigate that.

So, some of the things we're going to talk about are social cues that work pretty much for anybody and can be used in a variety of social settings.

Now, sometimes social settings can make a person feel like they are about to have to speak in front of a large audience. You know, lots of people that's like their number one fear.

Me personally, I would rather speak in front of a large group than sing in front of a large group. And I like singing, but speaking is more comfortable than singing. But some of the things people experience when they get in front of a large audience can be the same reactions that people experience when they are socially anxious. Maybe they're having a hard time reading the social cues around them. It could be an increased heart rate, sweaty palms sometimes and noticeable shaking.

You've mentioned that your voice can get shaky when you get nervous trying to meet new people, difficulties concentrating. And of course, there's always the stomach gnawing butterflies. You think butterflies are supposed to be nice and sweet, but they seem to, when it comes to nerves and things like that become vicious little animals there.

Have you experienced anything like that? I mean, would you be comfortable in most social settings?

Conner: It really depends. You know, I don't like getting in front of people, large groups. It's always been hard for me. I can remember a time when I was in eighth grade and we were forced to do the communications class where we just go up and basically speak in front of a class of 30 of your peers. And it's terrible. And I remember every time I'd get up there and I'd break eye contact with everybody and just look at my paper and read directly off of it.

I would never break from my paper. And my teacher was always like, you got to look up.

You have to speak more clearly, because I would pull back really hard with my pronunciations and things like that. So, I'd start mumbling through words and I just barely passed class.

Alison: Speak as fast as you can get to it done.

Conner: Yes.

Alison: Yeah. A lot of people experience those kinds of feelings. And oftentimes people you when they experience that stress and anxiety, they'll find themselves trying to avoid those stressful situations. But it doesn't have to be that way, especially when you are dealing with people who you work with or you have to see on a regular basis.

When we're looking at social cues and you can go online, and you can find all kinds of tips and helps. So, you really want to be careful who you're taking advice from.

One of the things I noticed when reading social cues is, they kind of go into two categories, either the physical signs that you need to be watching for or the verbal signs that you need to listen to to get those cues. And when we talk about social cues, we're talking about the things that give you information on how the person you are interacting with either feels or how they are responding to something that you say to them. And so, it's really important to kind of pay attention as you go along.

Let's talk about physical signs. Of course, the physical signs of reading social cues are body language.

Conner: I see that a lot. When I was working in retail, I would run into somebody, they'd be on an aisle or something and ask them how their day was going. And if I could help them find something over here, over there and they'd start looking at the shelf a little harder, they kind of not try to look at me at all. And it was like, I don't know if this person actually wants to talk to me. So, I was like, OK, well, you have a good day. And I just kind of walk off. And that was the end of the conversation.

Alison: Right! I know in retail that that tends to be the cue. I don't want you to sell me anything.

Conner: Yeah.

Alison: Especially if you're doing, you're in a place where you get commissioned for the sales. You know, that's the key. If they just ignore you. Well, and body language really does tell us a lot of cues. So basically, to be able to read somebody's body language, you have to be looking at them.

Conner: Yeah.

Alison: And so, an important part of being able to read social cues is to actually look at the person with whom you're speaking, their body language.

Are they relaxed or are they tense? Do they turn from you slightly?

Are their arms crossed? And if their arms are crossed, those can be a signal for several different things. One, either they're angry or they could be possibly irritated or just really don't want to hear what you have to say. But they could also be cold.

Conner: Or they could be uncomfortable.

Alison: Yes. Or uncomfortable.

Conner: That's something that I have a lot. You know, when I get shy, my body kind of shrinks a little bit. And my stature, I don't stand fully up. I hunched over a little bit and across my arms to bring in my body. So, I don't feel so exposed to what's going on around me.

Alison: Right. Because that protection of yourself when you're in an uncomfortable situation, so, you're sending signals to the person who you're talking to that hopefully they can read and then match to make you feel more comfortable in this situation.

What is something you might have tried to do when you realize, hey, I'm uncomfortable? Have you ever done anything to counteract that?

Conner: Well, if I realize it and a lot of the time I do, I try to uncross my arms. You know, it helps break it down from, you know, I'm here, I'm breaking my body and like, the room's kind of close in. You know, a lot of people have claustrophobia and stuff like that. Well, that's a lot of the time how I start to feel. You know, I don't have a fear of small spaces, but I feel like the room is shrinking in when I shrivel up.

So, I try to break apart my body. And put my arms back down to my side and stand up a little bit taller so that the conversation, I don't feel like they're growing in height and they become more of a dominant party against me, they are more on my same level.

You know, it's really strange on how it feels, but it does. It changed a lot for me when I did notice it because I would stand up taller. I would break. I'd put my arms down to my side and I'd be able to have an actual

conversation with the person where before I'm doing whatever I can to just get away.

I back up, I, I just say, you know, I'm having a good day and they'll ask me how my day is.

I'll be like, oh yeah, I have a good day. Obviously, most of the time lying in that situation just to get as far away from them and me as possible and then I'll relax a little bit once I'm away from them. But it's something that I've seriously struggled with in the past as well.

Alison: And I think everybody has moments of experiencing that. But being aware of that, this is something that I do on a regular basis, then that can really make a difference.

You said that when you realize that's what you're doing or that you're starting to feel uncomfortable, you have to actually deliberately break those physical things that you're doing and again, stand back up straight.

Eye contact is another way that we really read what the other person is saying to us. So, whether we maintain eye contact with them, which tells them, yes, I am listening to you, I am paying attention, or again, they're making eye contact, it shows that they're interested in what we have to say. If their eyes start darting away or they start looking down at a watch or something like that, you know, you can read into this person may need to wrap up this conversation.

Conner: That gets a little bit harder nowadays now that everybody has a phone because, When I was in high school, everybody would look down their phone, just ignore you. But now that I'm in the real world, I'm noticing that that's not always the case. A lot of the time these people have jobs that I'm talking to and stuff like that. So, they might be answering a serious question that they are getting or there might have been a medical emergency or something like that.

And it's another one of those. I'm making eye contact with you and you've now broken it to look at your phone.

Are you paying attention to me or are you trying to ignore me and get away from the conversation?

Are you actually answering something important that might be going on in your life?

Alison: Right. And hopefully, if it is something that, you know, they need to answer things like that, that they'll let you know, you can pause the conversation and as soon as they're able to get back to it and focus again, then the conversation resumes like normal. That maintaining that eye contact and actually paying attention to what the other person is doing is very important.

People who want to end a conversation, a lot of times will look toward the door, they'll look around the room. That can also be a sign that they're uncomfortable. Maybe they're looking for an escape.

Again, more of those signs where we talk about the body language that looking around the room, not keeping your focus, things can be a social cue for, OK, I need to evaluate where this conversation is going. Am I making them uncomfortable or are they just uncomfortable?

Then we also with joking. To understand if somebody is joking with a situation, oftentimes when people are telling a joke, they'll give you that sideways glance, maybe slightly raise an eyebrow, they grin as they're speaking, or again, make that eye contact right before they say the punch line because they want to see your reaction and your response to whether you think what they said was funny.

But have you ever had a situation where someone says, I was just joking when they said something that maybe was kind of mean spirited or kind of hurt your feelings? People who tend to do that, oftentimes you have to kind of evaluate. Is this a typical way this person treats me where they're constantly hurting my feelings and then they say I was just joking, or did I just misinterpret what they said?

So, you got to kind of keep a balance on interpreting whether someone's joking with you or whether they're just being a jerk.

Conner: OK, so what are some of the signs of somebody who'd be irritated?

Alison: Well, when you're watching people and you can watch them to see, they may make jerky motions as they're doing things, you know, obviously, if someone is slamming things around, they're probably pretty ticked off about something. Also, you can watch just in general, they might huff or sigh.

And, you know, those are some of the signs that, you know, people are. Irritated or upset about something, but they're not actually saying it out loud.

Conner: So, on that topic, if they were to get more verbal, what would be something that I'd want to be looking at?

Alison: Well, when you're talking about the verbal signs, obviously listening to a person's tone. Does a person speak with a happy tone? Is there a lilt to their voice? You learn to listen for cues with that.

And then again, you know, if they're irritated, they're liable to talk deeper or some people will get higher pitched. It just kind of depends on the person with that.

So, some of that is knowing the person when you're just getting to know them, you just kind of got to learn what they tend to do.

They also when someone's irritated or maybe tense, their speech will be clipped. Maybe they cut off some of their consonants on the end and do or very some people will actually get very precise in how they speak when they're irritated or upset about something.

And it might not necessarily be something that you've done, but something that happened before you ever entered the room. And then you need to be aware of that because they might not respond as positive as you might normally expect them to.

They get blunt or matter of fact in the way they answer a question rather than just kind of relaxed and conversing like normal.

Conner: So, what about a Soft No? You know, I work in real estate and I'm calling people all the time. And it's like, no, not right now or give me a few weeks, I kind of want to see where this is going to head and things like that.

Alison: Right. A lot of times people will need to say no or want to say no, but they want to do it in such a way that is not rude or might potentially hurt your feelings. So, a lot of times they will go and they'd say, "oh, well, I would love to have coffee with you, but I can't this week."

And so no, for the moment.

But, you know, it can be mean two things. It could mean I can't do it right now, but I would like to actually do it. And they tell you why they can't do it because there's some obstacle in the way. Or it could be just a nice way of putting it off indefinitely and leaving you to figure out what they actually meant. And again, some of this can be tricky.

You know, if you've got someone who is constantly saying, no, I'm sorry, I can't do that right now or answering like that, then you might kind of take the hint that I don't think they're just really that interested in either doing what I'm asking them to do or again, they may not want to do it with me. You know, and we have to understand that sometimes people just would prefer to be with someone else or to see us in certain situations, but they may not want to increase the contact beyond maybe a work relationship or a casual relationship.

And so that's important because there's people that we don't really, well, you know, you might not dislike them, but you don't really like them well enough to spend a whole day with or something. So, we kind of have to have that give and take.

Conner: OK, so if I'm trying to improve my social skills, what would be the best way to go about that?

Alison: Well, there's a lot of things that you can do. And of course, keeping in mind all the things that we just talked about will be very beneficial.

But there are some things that you can literally do to practice interpreting social cues.

One thing that is handy is just people watch, you know, maybe go somewhere where there's a lot of people and just sit and watch their interactions and try to determine how they are feeling in whatever setting that they are in and how they respond, like to the person who is with them. You can do this, especially if you have a friend who is particularly good at reading social cues from people. You might bring them along and have them watch at the same time and just to test and see if you're getting the same vibes that they are getting when you know that they're good at that. You can also watch TV or watch a movie or something and just watch and try to notice...

OK, he just cued her this or, you know, watching this one scene and stuff, she's getting really upset, but they're not paying attention. And so, you can do some things like that.

Another thing you can do with that is cut off the sound of a show and see if you can interpret correctly what the characters are feeling in that show.

One thing, too, it's called the Spotlight Effect. And just kind of be aware that everyone kind of tends to assume that other people notice us and our actions when sometimes they never saw either the goofy thing we did or the awkward thing we did. They never actually really saw it. We tend to assume that all positive cues, too, are just in general when they may actually be directing a positive cue toward us. And then we miss it because it was actually toward us when we thought, oh, it's just the group in general.

But then on the other hand, with that, a lot of times we will take all the negative cues that someone puts out and take them all personal, where really they didn't intend them to be directed toward us.

Again, like I said, you know, you came into the room and they had just gotten off the phone with someone who was yelling at them or something. And you're the person who is next in line. And it may not have been anything you said or did to actually irritate them or upset them.

Another thing to watch for is, again, remember, watch a person's eyes and their mouth. Are they tense around their mouth? If you are in a conversation, do they open their mouth slightly? That might be a sign that they are wanting to say something and they're waiting for you to be quiet long enough for them to get a word in edgewise.

Another thing we need to do is because usually we tend to be really hard on ourselves. And while it's really good to try to read all the social cues around us, we need to consider that sometimes we need to cut ourselves a little slack, because always being on high alert, always trying to interpret and to read what is going on around us can actually be really exhausting. So sometimes you just have to cut yourself a little slack. You know, I didn't get it that time. I missed that cue they sent me. I'll do better next time.

And now a final big thing for reading social cues and being involved in people's lives is get off your devices, put them down and actually interact with the person who's sitting beside you or in the same room.

Well, Conner, it was great having you here today. And we really appreciate you taking time to join us for this podcast.

Conner: Well, thanks. I figured that these social cues are going to help me, you know, not just my professional as a realtor, but in my personal life as well.

If I was looking to get more resources, things for my well-being, physically, mentally, anything like that, where would I go in your Extension area to find more?

Alison: Well, just visit our website at www.uaex.uada.edu. We have under our Life Skills and Wellness a whole section called Personal and Family Well-being, and there's lots of resources for anyone, whether it's a parent or a young adult or even a youth.

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