Emotional Presence · About 4 minutes

After You Speak, Before You Know

Keeping your experience company while the reply is still unknown

The message has left your hands. Your mind has already written the answer you least want to receive.

Perhaps you reread your own words for signs of offense. Perhaps another message starts taking shape: an apology, a softer version, an explanation nobody has yet requested. The exposure of having spoken can make withdrawing seem attractive before the other person has had a chance to answer.

In a fictional workplace example, Rosa asks to move a regular meeting that now overlaps with a class she wants to attend. She offers two alternatives and explains which responsibilities she can still cover. After sending the request, she worries that the coordinator will think she is unreliable.

At this point, the coordinator has not replied. Rosa's worry tells us about her experience of waiting. It cannot supply the missing response.

Earlier conduct belongs in the picture. A coordinator who repeatedly dismisses scheduling concerns gives Rosa reason for caution. A coordinator who usually takes a day to reply supplies different context. The history informs her judgment without settling this particular answer.

It may help to describe the present moment plainly: "I made a request. I care about the class and my work. I haven't heard back." That description is less dramatic than the imagined accusation, but it includes what Rosa actually knows.

Feeling exposed does not by itself tell her whether the request was wise. She could notice a factual error or rethink an existing commitment. If she wants to amend the message for those reasons, she can. Keeping the first wording at all costs would be another way of losing touch with what she thinks now.

Gross's account of emotion regulation includes shifting attention and changing circumstances.[1] Putting the phone aside, returning to work or asking for company may make the interval more manageable. Those possibilities are useful to the extent that they help with this day; they are not a test of how well Rosa tolerates uncertainty.

A deadline may require a follow-up. Workplace power, access needs and financial dependence may also change the stakes. In some situations, practical advice or information about rights matters more than another reflection on feelings.

If a friend is supporting Rosa, the friend could listen to why the class matters or help her keep track of the response date. "I'm sure it will be fine" may be less helpful than being willing to accompany her without knowing.

Eventually a reply may arrive. An agreement would not prove that Rosa's worry was foolish. A refusal would not establish that asking was wrong. A vague response might lead to another question. Each brings information she does not have yet.

Rosa has to find company for the part that happens after speaking and before knowing.

There is a class Rosa wants to take. For this afternoon, she can turn toward the life she was asking to make room for and check for a reply when the practical deadline calls for it.

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Companion reading · Staying With What You Cannot Fix

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Emotional Presence (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. Psychological Inquiry, 26(1), 1–26. Source.

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