

Understanding Referential Thinking

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I am currently twenty-eight years old and have had schizoaffective disorder since age nineteen. During episodes and after I developed referential thinking where I thought people were directly referencing me in conversation when they were only talking about the subject they mentioned. Someone could be saying, “I hate that, it’s really awful,” and I would think they were indirectly saying they hated me and that I was awful. While thinking someone was referencing me, I felt worried the person speaking disliked me which created stress and contributed towards my belief they were referencing me. My referential thinking usually occurred while I was feeling stressed and had poor self-esteem. I believed I was an unlikeable person which made me feel others would think the same thing and want to mention it. When people have used more pronouns and less descriptive language, I have made more referential connections between their message and myself. When I heard pronouns while perceiving information referentially I always substituted the pronoun for myself even if the person wasn’t talking about me. For example, a person would say “*Someone* took too many cookies.” They could have been talking about my sister but I would perceive them as talking about me. When I knew exactly who or what the speaker was talking about, I substituted the pronoun with my own name far less. The people expressing negativity were simply disappointed about the subject they were discussing and the only reason it seemed as though they were talking about me was because I was assuming the subject of their statement was in some way intended to be me and the descriptions referencing the subject were intended to describe me. When I have reminded myself the speaker is only talking about the subject they actually stated and that subject is not a symbol which is intended to take my stead, I have been able to determine who or what the speaker is actually talking about and have realized their words have nothing to do with me.

Some of the referential thinking occurred when I returned to environments similar to those I had been in during episodes such as a school setting. I returned to school for graduate courses and during my first couple

days experienced a great deal of referential thinking. Being in a college setting triggered the same emotions I felt during my first episode because much of it was spent in class. The combination of the classroom environment and the same emotions made me feel I was in the same situation as my first episode. My thinking also became somewhat disoriented which I believe was a result of feeling paranoia which I also experienced during my first episode. Once I was able to tell myself this situation is completely different than the ones during the episodes, the referential thinking subsided and I was able to function and interact. I realized when I’m in similar situations as I had been in during episodes, I was more susceptible to experiencing schizoaffective symptoms. Referential thinking has also had a direct correlation to my stress levels and I know when I am feeling stressed, referential thinking and other schizoaffective symptoms have been more likely to occur. Knowing these things has given me expectations for times referential thinking can occur. Having these expectations allows me to prepare for these situations and remind myself I need to connect the statement the speaker is making directly to the subject matter they are talking about.

There are times where people simply want to vent a negative thought and I have just so happened to be the person they decided to tell. Usually when people want to say something about someone they are with they’ll either address them directly, make it very obvious they are referencing a particular person and ensure that person knows they are being referenced, or they won’t express their feelings about that person at all. People who approached me with negativity and anger used to make me feel as though I had done something to make them angry. Sometimes people are just in bad moods and the cause is independent of everyone surrounding them including myself. Something may be happening in their life which has them thinking negatively and they’ll still be angry regardless of how they are approached and who they are talking to. Another way to eliminate referential thinking is by evaluating situations from an objective standpoint. When I have sought to understand the true reasons people are angry while talking to me I have realized sometimes people are in bad moods, some people are just angry about

something in their life, and I have also realized I didn't say or do anything which created their anger which makes me independent of their statements. Sometimes I realize the person was in a negative mood before I was talking to them which is why the first thing they said to me was something negative. Other times I realize people completely switch subjects in conversation and their switch to something negative was simply their own doing and was independent of anything I said or did.

Another facet of referential thinking is interpreting people's body language and tone. Many times while people are relating a negative thought they'll look angry and it may seem as though they are angry at me but in reality they were only relating their emotions through facial expressions and body language towards me. People who are speaking angrily or negatively about something are outwardly expressing these emotions while speaking about the impetus for these emotions and it seems they are directing this anger towards their listener while doing so because of the way they are expressing their emotions. This happens even when they are angry at something other than their listener who may happen to be me but can be confusing because they are directing anger stemming from something else seemingly towards me merely because I am the one listening and not because they actually have any

anger at or because of me. The emotions are naturally expressed regardless of who they are angry at.

There were other times where it seemed as though people were looking at me in reproach and hatefully but this was self-perpetuated. The person would first begin conveying a negative thought and I believed they were referencing me. This would trigger negative and shameful body language from me which triggered the person conveying the negative thought to then look at me reproachfully. The only reason they looked at me reproachfully was my body language but in reality, they knew nothing about me and most times we were only barely acquainted. I also hadn't done anything wrong but thought I must have since I had lost all my friends from my first episode and felt there must have been something I had done for this to occur which wasn't the case. This happens because many people are unable to generate genuine emotions conversationally and will instead reflect the same emotions and attitudes they think their interlocutor expects of them. Another reason this happens is people think if there is reason for me to be ashamed, which showed in my demeanor and body language, then there was reason for them to reproach me and they acted on the emotional cue I was creating and the same concept is applicable to most emotions.