Echolalia: When Words and Phrases Repeat

An adult-friendly guide to repeated speech, verbal stimming, and communication

Have you ever echoed the end of someone's question, found yourself repeating a line from a movie, or said a familiar phrase because you liked how it sounded? Sometimes this is **echolalia**. The reason for repeating words can vary from one moment to the next.

What is echolalia?

Echolalia is the repetition of words or phrases heard from another person or from media. It can happen immediately or after a delay. The repetition may be intentional, automatic, meaningful, soothing, or difficult to explain.

Immediate: A coworker asks, "Did you send the email?" You repeat, "Send the email?" while working out your answer.

Delayed: You say "We have a situation!" from a show you watched weeks ago when something goes wrong. The phrase may communicate frustration or simply feel satisfying to say.

What might repetition be doing for you?

Communicating	A familiar line may express a feeling, request, joke, or protest when other words are hard to find.
Processing	Echoing a question may help you hold on to what you heard or give you time to respond.
Regulating	Repeating a sound or rhythm may feel calming, energizing, predictable, or pleasurable.
Connecting	Sharing a familiar quote may be a way of joining in, showing affection, or making someone laugh.

There is not always one clear purpose. The same phrase can mean different things depending on your situation, tone, and experience.

Echolalia, scripting, and verbal stimming: what is different?

Echolalia: repeating speech heard elsewhere. **Scripting:** using remembered or prepared wording, sometimes drawn from something you heard. **Verbal stimming:** repeating sounds or words for sensory or emotional regulation. A person can experience more than one of these.

Does this mean I have ADHD or autism?

Echolalia has been studied much more in autism, especially in children. Adults with ADHD may describe repeating phrases, humming, or other verbal stims, but research specifically on echolalia in ADHD adults is limited. **Echolalia on its own does not diagnose ADHD, autism, or AuDHD.**

Understanding Your Own Repetition

Notice the pattern and choose support that fits you.

Try this simple check-in

1. Notice: What did I repeat? Was it something another person said, a line I remembered, or a sound I made up?

2. Look at the situation: Was I trying to answer, excited, tired, overloaded, bored, or enjoying the rhythm?

3. Consider the effect: Did repeating help me communicate, think, connect, or feel more comfortable? Did it cause a problem I want help with?

4. Decide what I need: More time, less noise, permission to repeat, a written question, or another way to communicate?

Useful words when other people notice

When you need thinking time: “Sometimes I repeat part of a question while I’m processing it. Give me a moment.”

When a phrase carries meaning: “When I say that line, it means I’m overwhelmed and need a break.”

When it is a stim: “I repeat certain sounds because I like the rhythm. I’m not asking you to respond.”

How other people can help

Give the person time to finish and respond. Do not assume an echo means agreement, refusal, or a lack of understanding. Pay attention to the context, and ask what a phrase means when clarification would be helpful. Offer writing, text, gestures, or other communication options when preferred.

When to seek extra support

A speech-language pathologist can help if you want support with language, communication, or finding more ways to express yourself. If repetition is **new or suddenly different in adulthood**, especially with changes in thinking, speech, movement, or other neurological symptoms, seek medical assessment.

What the research can—and cannot—tell us

Research with autistic children shows that echolalia can have communicative functions, including requests, responses, and turn-taking. Those findings do not explain every person’s repetition or establish how often echolalia occurs among adult women with ADHD. Claims that all echolalia follows fixed “gestalt language processing” stages are not established; individualized understanding is more useful.

Sources and further reading

ASHA: Autism Practice Portal — asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/autism/

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