Non-verbal learning disorders affect all ages

"The slap heard round the world" involving Will Smith and Chris Rock at the Academy Awards has shone a light on important issues like hair loss and anger problems. But one part of the incident has left some wondering: why did Rock appear to strike a welcoming stance – smiling, arms in back, leaning forward, even a humorous "Uh oh!" – as Smith approached with the opposite demeanor?

The answer may lie in a revelation Rock made in 2020, according to several media reports at the time. The comedian suffers from a non-verbal learning disorder (NVLD), making things like social cues and spatial awareness difficult.

NVLD affects the young and old and is treatable, says Ashley Brim, a speech language pathologist at OSF HealthCare in Alton, Illinois. Brim says the issue could be inborn or the result of something like a traumatic brain injury that affects the frontal lobe of the brain.

"It's another area of speech pathology that's called pragmatics," Brim explains. "And what that is, is those social communication cues that we just follow innately because it's just how we've been taught. Things such as appropriate space in between each other whenever you're talking for proximity. And depending on the different cultures that you're in, certain cultures like to be closer. Other ones are like, you need to stay far back away from me."

"If I make a joke, this is what I need to look for in your face and your body language that tells me that I have unintentionally made you unhappy," Brim notes as another example. "Whenever I thought that it was more humorous on that side."

While the more well-known physical therapy may involve stretching or other exercises, therapy for a NVLD, Brim says, usually involves a social script activity.

As part of this therapy, Brim instructs an adult patient, "I want you to tell me what identifications you can find in this picture, in this video that tells you this person is upset or that tells you that this person is happy."

"And then vice versa. It's very similar for kids. Usually people with autism have some more difficulties with pragmatics, kind of understanding that," she says. "And then identifying, OK, this is what this emotion is. This is how I respond to this emotion."

Therapy also includes sending the patient around the rehabilitation office to talk to Mission Partners (OSF HealthCare employees). This gets the person real-life practice in social interaction.

Brim adds that young people are at an age where they're learning how to interact socially and build long-lasting friendships. So it's important that if a parent, teacher, or other caregiver sees signs of a learning disorder, they talk to a health care provider right away.