

Understanding Aphasia

Aphasia is a language difficulty. Imagine yourself living in a foreign country where you do not speak the language. You would continue to have thoughts, possess all your former knowledge and have the same ability to make decisions. But you would be unable to speak to the residents of the country. You could not rely on their spoken or written words to help you understand. This is similar to living with aphasia.

Communication requires at least two components: speech and language. Speech refers to the muscles you use to produce sounds. The muscles of your lips, tongue, throat, and lungs are all used to produce sounds that make up words. Language refers to the “dictionary” of words, word meanings and rules for combining words into sentences. This “dictionary” is located in your brain. Aphasia occurs when a stroke has affected the part of the brain that holds the language “dictionary”.

People with aphasia are competent adults who know more than they can say.

When communicating with a person with aphasia:

- Speak in a tone of voice appropriate for communicating with an adult. Do not sound condescending. Do not sound like you are speaking to a child.
- Acknowledge that the person with aphasia is a competent, knowledgeable person who can make decisions. Acknowledge that the person with aphasia knows what they want to say but cannot say it.

“I know you know.”

- If you do not have the time to communicate, explain this, and give a time when you will return to finish your conversation. Make sure you do return.

On the next pages are more tips to help you communicate with people with aphasia.

How can I communicate with a person who has aphasia?

Aphasia masks competence; so it's likely that the person you're communicating with knows more than they can say. Based on the SCA™ approach, here are tips to help you:

- Get the message *in*
- Get the message *out*
- Verify

Getting the message *in*:

First, establish: Does the person with aphasia understand what you are saying?

If YES, proceed.

If NO, use supports.

Here are some ideas:

- Establish a clear general topic first; and then move on to the details.
- Communicate one idea at a time.
- Use short, simple sentences and expressive voice.

Example:

DON'T:

"I will help you get up, showered and dressed and then I am going to take you to the dining room for you to have breakfast but first you have to take your pill."

DO:

"Here is your pill to take." Pause and give pill.

"First I am going to help you take a shower." Pause.

"Then I will help you get dressed." Pause.

"After all that, I will take you for breakfast."

- As you are talking, use a hierarchy of techniques:
 - Use gestures and facial expressions to enhance what you are saying.
 - Write key words or main ideas in large bold print. (e.g. thick black marker)
 - Use pictures/pictographs. Focus on one at a time.
 - For example, if you were talking about an issue in the newspaper, is there a picture or headline you can show to the person with aphasia?
 - Use objects in the environment to help get your message across.
- Eliminate as much distraction as possible (noises, other people, too much material)
- Observe the person to see if they understand (with facial expression/eye gaze, posture, gestures)
- Look at the person with aphasia when speaking. Your facial expression can help the person with aphasia understand you.

Getting the message *out*:

Does the person have a way of conveying their message to you?
This message can be verbal or non-verbal.

If NO, here are some ideas:

- Establish a clear general topic first; and then move on to understanding the details.
- Ask Yes/No questions and make sure the person has a way to respond. Use a written YES / NO if needed.
- Ask one thing at a time.
- Encourage the person with aphasia to write down a word or draw if they can.
- Ask the person to give clues by gesturing, or pointing to objects, pictures and written key words.

Example:

"I have heard you are a big fan of music." "What kind of music do you like?"

(Write possible choices, and allow them to point):

OPERA / CLASSICAL / BLUES / OTHER

- Give the person time to respond.
- Multiple choice formats are better than yes/no questions, when you have a list of potential answers
- Phrase Yes/No questions in a logical sequence (general to specific)

Verifying:

- Summarize: Pull things together at the end of a longer discussion; summarize slowly and clearly what you think the person is trying to say. e.g. "So let me make sure I understand..." Add gestures or written key words, if necessary.
- Use Yes/No questions to verify information.

If the information you exchange needs to be accurate, it is especially important to VERIFY what you have heard, using techniques above.