

communication strategies: some dos and don'ts

Aphasia is a communication impairment usually acquired as a result of a stroke or other brain injury. It affects both the ability to express oneself through speech, gesture, and writing, and to understand the speech, gesture, and writing of others. Aphasia thus changes the way in which we communicate with those people most important to us: family, friends, and co-workers.

The impact of aphasia on relationships may be profound, or only slight. No two people with aphasia are alike with respect to severity, former speech and language skills, or personality. But in all cases it is essential for the person to communicate as successfully as possible from the very beginning of the recovery process. Here are some suggestions to help communicate with a person with aphasia:

- * Make sure you have the person's attention before you start.
- * Minimize or eliminate background noise (such as TV, radio, other people)
- * Keep communication simple, but adult. Simplify your own sentence structure and reduce your rate of speech. You don't need to speak louder than normal but do emphasize key words. Don't "talk down" to the person with aphasia.
- * Encourage and use all modes of communication (writing, drawing, yes/no responses, choices, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions) in addition to speech.
- * Give them time to talk and let them have a reasonable amount of time to respond. Avoid speaking for the person with aphasia except when necessary and ask permission before doing so.
- * Praise all attempts to speak; make speaking a pleasant experience and provide stimulating conversation. Downplay errors and avoid frequent criticisms/corrections. Avoid insisting that each word be produced perfectly.
- * Augment speech with gesture and visual aids whenever possible. Repeat a statement when necessary.
- * Encourage them to be as independent as possible. Avoid being overprotective.
- * Whenever possible continue normal activities (such as dinner with family, company, going out). Do not shield people with aphasia from family or friends or ignore them in a group conversation. Rather, try to involve them in family decision-making as much as possible. Keep them informed of events but avoid burdening them with day to day details.

These guidelines are intended to enhance communication with people with aphasia. However, they cannot guarantee that communication will be immediate or on a par with former skills.