



Communicating Despite Aphasia

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(Reprinted from the *Stroke Connection Magazine* January/February 2001 issue)

Aphasia is a speech and language impairment that occurs when the speech area of the brain has been affected by a stroke, head injury, aneurysm or other neurologically based disorder. An individual with aphasia may have difficulty with word finding, sentence formulation, comprehension, reading and writing.

Activities that were once taken for granted — talking on the phone, reading the paper, or conversing with friends — are now difficult or impossible. Aphasia is frustrating to the survivor as well as the caregiver and family.

As a speech/language pathologist, I am a strong advocate of caregiver participation in the rehab process. The caregiver and family should begin helping with speech and language restoration from the start. Here are some ways that can be done.

1. *Develop a communication book for the survivor.* Use a spiral notebook, which can be purchased at any school supply store. Your first page should contain printed names and pictures of family and friends. Print photos on a copy machine, cut them out and paste each picture above the person's name. Point to the picture as you talk about current activities with the survivor. For example, you might mention that your daughter called long distance and that it snowed for the first time in Idaho where she lives. Short, simple sentences are easiest for an individual with aphasia to understand.
2. *Each time you are with the survivor, prepare a new page and use it as a basis for conversation.* Each page should be devoted to just one topic. Keep it simple — not too many words or pictures.
3. *Use a Polaroid I-Zone camera to take pictures of familiar things at home.* Paste the postage-stamp-size pictures on a communication book page accompanied by a single word description. This provides an opportunity for the survivor to share information and stories with hospital and rehab staff, and it is a sure-fire way of stimulating functional communication! (The I-Zone camera is readily available for about \$20.)
4. *When the survivor returns home from the hospital, replace the spiral notebook with a pocket-size binder.* This allows you to add and delete pages. As the survivor becomes more independent and his or her world expands, you will want to add pages specific for his or her needs. These may include pictures and words to assist in taking public transportation, driving, restaurants, banking, shopping, etc. Do not be concerned that a communication book will slow the return of speech. In fact, it helps it expand.
5. *Encourage the survivor to become involved in a communication group.* Participants in our Sharp Hospital group in San Diego use pages from their communication books to discuss topics in the news as well as personal experiences. The caregiver assists the survivor in preparing a "Focus Page" that he or she brings to the group each week. The page contains words and

pictures related to the topic he or she wishes to discuss with the group. Communication groups help survivors use the techniques they have learned in speech therapy sessions to produce meaningful communication.

6. Caregivers and family members play a significant part in helping survivors with aphasia communicate again. Do not sit on the sidelines and worry. Become an active participant in the rehab process.

Diane Johnson has been a speech/language pathologist for over 30 years. She has worked in clinic, home health, hospital, rehab, and private practice settings.



Caring for a Person with Aphasia

(Reprinted from the Stroke Connection Magazine May/June 1996 issue)

Aphasia is the loss or reduction of the ability to speak, read, write, understand or calculate. If you or someone you know has aphasia, share this list with family and friends to help them better understand how to communicate with you.

I WILL

- I WILL...** Encourage the person to speak and praise all efforts. Promote and encourage independence.
- I WILL...** Give the person every opportunity to express him or herself.
- I WILL...** Speak in short, simple sentences, using a natural voice and a slow rate of speech.
- I WILL...** Practice speech exercises during short sessions in the home.
- I WILL...** Carefully place yourself and all objects within the person's visual range, if there is a cut in the person's visual field.

I WILL NOT

- I WILL NOT...** Force the person to speak.
- I WILL NOT...** Speak for the person unless absolutely necessary.
- I WILL NOT...** Interrupt the person when he or she is speaking.
- I WILL NOT...** Anticipate the person's every need.
- I WILL NOT...** Talk about the person in his or her presence; lack of speech does not mean lack of comprehension or lack of intelligence.

Excerpted and adapted from *Feedback*, the newsletter from Speech Pathology, Inc., Volume 10 #4.