

HELPING WITH COMMUNICATION AFTER A STROKE

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



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KEY POINTS

- A stroke can affect communication in lots of ways. The most common are aphasia (damage to the parts of the brain which manage language) and dysarthria (muscle weakness in the mouth and throat)
- Other symptoms, like muscle weakness or sensory loss, can also make communication more difficult.
- Difficulty communicating their thoughts does not mean a person is less able to think, or is less worth listening to. Do not speak over people, assume what they mean, or try to speak for them.
- Be patient with people who are struggling to communicate.
- Consider using aids - like gestures, writing, drawings, or facial expressions - to help in conversation.
- Repeat yourself if necessary, and be prepared to ask them to repeat themselves too.

How does stroke affect communication?

After a stroke, around 1 in 3 people have new difficulties communicating. This might affect reading, writing, speaking, or understanding - or some combination of these four. Communication difficulties can be frightening and deeply frustrating, which can make conversations upsetting for people struggling with them.

There are three main ways in which a stroke affects communication. These are called aphasia, dysarthria, and speech apraxia. There are also some other ways a stroke can affect communication.

Many people with a stroke find that their communication improves with time and practice, or that they can find new ways to communicate. However, no matter how long it has been since someone had their stroke, patience and understanding around communication are always important.

Aphasia

Aphasia is a condition where the parts of the brain involved in language processing are damaged. How this affects communication will depend on which parts of the brain are affected and how badly.

Aphasia can be expressive (difficulty forming words) or interpretive (difficulty understanding words), and can affect spoken communication, written communication, or both. It can lead to behaviour like:

- Struggling to find the words for something
- Saying or writing the wrong word (sometimes without noticing)
- Swearing, singing, or making another noise instead of speaking
- Being unable to understand words, or misunderstanding them
- Stuttering, hesitating, slurring, or other speech impediments

This does not necessarily mean that a person's thinking has been affected. Aphasia is a condition of communication, not of thinking.

CHSS has an illustrated factsheet on Aphasia, which can help people with aphasia and other communication problems to support their own communication.

Find this and other aphasia-friendly resources online: www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub

Speech apraxia

Speech apraxia is a difficulty with co-ordinating the muscles of the throat, mouth, and tongue. This can affect a person's ability to speak clearly.

People with speech apraxia may slur, stumble over their words, or speak with an unusual tone or cadence. People with speech apraxia are aware of the errors in their speech, and patience is important as apraxia makes speech difficult and slow.

Dysarthria

Dysarthria is a weakness of the mouth and throat muscles, which can make it difficult to speak. People with dysarthria may slur, whisper, mumble, or otherwise have difficulty speaking clearly.

Dysarthria is a problem of movement, and does not affect a person's ability to understand you.

Other communication issues

Other ways that a stroke may make communication more difficult might include:

- Hearing loss or deafness, which may mean that a person struggles with spoken conversation.
- Sight loss or blindness, which may mean that a person struggles with written conversations, or struggles to pick up on context like your facial expressions and movements.
- Muscle weakness in the hands, which can affect the ability to write or type, or in the face, which can affect the ability to express emotions clearly.
- Emotional or cognitive changes, which may make a person more likely to misinterpret what you say, or may lead to inappropriate responses.
- Memory loss, which can make conversations difficult as the person may lose track of what is being talked about.

Many people have more than one communication issue at a time. However, all of these difficulties can be overcome with care and patience.

The most important thing you can do to help someone with communication difficulties is to trust them and give them space. Understand that they are trying, and that it may take longer for you to communicate, but it is still absolutely worth doing! Speaking to people, and more importantly listening to people, after they have had a stroke, is one of the most valuable things you can do to help a friend or family member with their recovery.

What can I do to help?

- Give your full attention. Try to cut out distractions and background noise - turn off radios and TVs, and try to find a quiet space to talk.
- Position yourself so that your face is clearly visible.
- Be patient and offer reassurance.
- Be aware that sometimes unexpected, involuntary forms of expression like swearing or singing come out.
- Speak slowly and clearly and at normal volume.
- Don't rush; give plenty of time.
- Try to establish a reliable way of communicating 'yes' and 'no' between you.
- Use facial expressions and simple gestures such as thumbs up or down, pointing or miming.
- Keep language clear and simple. Use short sentences and multiple-choice questions.
- Use communication aids like conversation support books, charts, computers, phones, tablets, etc.
- Ask for repetition if you don't understand. Don't be afraid to admit you didn't hear.
- Clearly indicate when you have understood.
- Write down key words as you go through the conversation, and use them to check your understanding is correct. Encourage the person to try and write too, if possible - even a couple of letters may help them to find the word they are searching for.
- It is okay if the conversation gets stuck. It is fine to leave a topic and come back to it later.
- Prioritise the needs of the person with communication difficulties. Ask them what you can do to support them.

What should I avoid doing?

- ✗ If you are having difficulty understanding the person, don't pretend that you have. Instead, be honest and explain that you have not been able to understand and go back to a point in the conversation where you were both clear.
- ✗ Don't speak for the person or presume that they can't respond / understand.
- ✗ It is important to keep your focus and maintain communication with the person you are communicating with. Don't ask other people for information that the person could provide.
- ✗ Try not to build unrealistic expectations, and accept all forms of communication.

Where can I get more help?

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland offers a range of rehabilitation support services for people with speech and language problems after a stroke and their carers, throughout Scotland. The service can provide:

- One-to-one communication support. This is provided either in hospital, at home or in the community. A trained communication partner will support the individual to achieve their personal goals.
- Communication support groups, either in hospital or in the community. These give people the chance to practice and improve their communication in a relaxed, supportive environment.
- Health information, including more booklets and factsheets.
- An illustrated communication support booklet, which you can order online at chssonline.paramountprinters.co.uk

To find out more, or for further information, support and advice, contact the CHSS Advice Line:

Tel: **0808 801 0899** (9.30am–4pm, Mon–Fri)

Email: adviceline@chss.org.uk

Web: www.chss.org.uk

Other organisations who may be able to help:

Your local NHS Speech and Language Service

Ask your doctor for a referral to this service for support, advice, and therapies.

The Tavistock Trust for Aphasia

Tel: **01525 290002**

Email: enquiries@aphasiatavistocktrust.org

Website: www.aphasiatavistocktrust.org

A charity working to improve quality of life around aphasia.

Headway

Tel: **0808 800 2244**

Email: helpline@headway.org.uk

Website: www.headway.org.uk

Headway is a UK-wide charity working to improve life after brain injury.

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You can also go to our website for information, advice and support: www.chss.org.uk

Find a range of easy-to-read booklets and factsheets at our resources hub:

www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub

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