

## Understanding Aphasia after Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)

“**Aphasia** is a debilitating communication disability caused by damage to the language processing centres of the brain. An individual with aphasia may have difficulty understanding, talking, reading and writing, but their intelligence is not affected. The most common causes of aphasia are stroke and traumatic brain injury”

(NHMRC Centre of Clinical Research Excellence in Aphasia, Australia)

People with aphasia may experience difficulty with a few everyday activities:

- having a conversation
- talking in a group or noisy environment
- reading a book or magazine or road sign
- understanding or telling jokes
- writing a letter or filling in a form
- using the telephone
- using numbers and money
- expressing their immediate needs or ideas or words
- saying their own name or the names of their family
- going out into the community



Due to these difficulties, people with aphasia can experience isolation, unemployment, reduced community participation, loss of personal identity, low mood and difficulty maintaining relationships.

It is important to recognise that living with and/or caring for a person with aphasia is not always easy. It can be isolating, as well as challenging at times. Often, friends and family living with a person with aphasia may find it hard to:

- slow down
- resist finishing sentences
- adapt the way they communicate
- keep the conversation going
- understand what a person is saying
- know what to do

The good news is that there are communication techniques that can help ease the exchange of information between the conversation partner and the person with aphasia:

**(1) Getting the message IN** is a matter of modifying the way you communicate to help the person with aphasia understand

Some strategies include:

- ✚ Using short, simple sentences and an expressive voice
- ✚ Using gestures when conversing to add more information
- ✚ Writing keywords or main ideas down – e.g., PAIN in large or bold print.
- ✚ Using pictures and focusing on one at a time.
- ✚ Eliminating distraction – noises, other people, or multiple visual materials.
- ✚ Observing the person’s facial expression, eye gaze, body posture or gestures to determine level of comprehension.

**(2) Getting the message OUT** might be a bigger challenge for someone with aphasia. To help them express their thoughts:

- ✚ Ask yes or no questions.
- ✚ Ask one question at a time.
- ✚ Encourage them to gesture, point to objects or pictures, or write key words, such as “Can you show me...” to add more visual information
- ✚ Allow plenty of time for them to process what you have said and to respond.
- ✚ Ask fixed choice questions such as, “Do you want water or coffee?”
- ✚ Phrase yes or no questions from general to specific.

**(3) Verifying the message** is important to making the person feel understood and valued. Summarise slowly and clearly by saying, “So let me make sure I understand” and using the following methods:

- ✚ Repeating the person’s message.
- ✚ Clarifying what you think the person has said
- ✚ Expanding on what you think the person might be trying to say
- ✚ Recapping the conversation

In summary, it is important when working (or living) with a person with Aphasia to assume that they have competence. That is, assume that the person knows what is being said and that they know what they would like to say.

Consult a Speech Pathologist for specialist aphasia support and advice.

**For further reading and / or support:**

1. Visit the **Australian Aphasia Association (AAA)** website: <http://www.aphasia.org.au>
2. **NHMRC Centre of Clinical Research Excellence in Aphasia (CCRE in Aphasia Rehabilitation)** website: <http://www.ccreaphasia.org.au>
3. National Stroke Foundation – <http://www.strokefoundation.com.au>
4. Visit the **Speech Pathology Australia**: <http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au>