



ABIOS

Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service

FACTSHEET: Communication

Audience: Professionals

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Understanding Aphasia after Acquired Brain Injury

“**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 number of everyday activities. For example:

- 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
- saying their own name or the names of their family
- expressing their immediate needs or ideas or words
- 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 establishing and maintaining familial and personal relationships.

It is important to recognise that living with and/or caring for a person with aphasia is not always an easy role to play. It can be isolating, as well as challenging. Often, friends and family living 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 and feelings between the conversation partner and the person with aphasia:

(1) Getting the message IN is a matter of modifying the way you converse to ensure you are being understood by the person with aphasia.

Some methods to try include:

- ✚ Using short, simple sentences and an expressive voice.
- ✚ Using gestures when conversing.
- ✚ Writing keywords or main ideas down – e.g. in large or bold print.
- ✚ Using pictures and focusing on one at a time.
- ✚ Eliminating distraction – noises, 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...”
- ✚ Allow plenty of time to understand and to generate a response.
- ✚ 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 with aphasia feels understood and valued.

Summarise slowly and clearly by saying, “So let me make sure I understand” and using the following strategies:

- ✚ Repeating the person's message.
- ✚ Expanding on what you think the person might be trying to say
- ✚ Clarifying what you think they are saying
- ✚ Recapping the conversation (if it was a long one)

Courtesy of The Aphasia Institute (Toronto, Canada)

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