

Understanding Aphasia (Language Impairment) 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)

If you have aphasia, you 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



Due to these difficulties, you can experience isolation, unemployment, reduced community participation, loss of personal identity, low mood and difficulty 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 at times. Often, your friends and family may find it hard to:

- slow down their speaking
- resist finishing sentences
- adapt the way they communicate
- keep the conversation going
- understand what you are 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 you and your conversation partner.

According to The **Aphasia Institute (Toronto, Canada)** the key to effective communication is ensuring messages are taken IN, messages get OUT and messages are VERIFIED by the person with aphasia:

(1) Getting the message IN is a matter of others modifying the way they communicate to ensure that you understand them.

Some methods for them to try include:

- ✚ Using short, simple sentences and an expressive voice.
- ✚ Using gestures when conversing.
- ✚ 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 is a matter of how others help you to express your thoughts

Some methods for them to try include:

- ✚ Asking yes or no questions.
- ✚ Asking one question at a time.
- ✚ Using gesture, pointing to objects or pictures, or writing key words, such as “Can you show me...”
- ✚ Giving you sufficient time to respond.
- ✚ Asking fixed choice questions such as, “Do you want water or coffee?”
- ✚ Phrasing yes or no questions from general to specific.

(3) Verifying the message is a matter of others summarising your conversation slowly and clearly (E.g. “So let me make sure I understand...”), which is important in making you feel understood and valued.

Some methods for them to try include:

- ✚ Adding gestures or written key words.
- ✚ Repeating your message.
- ✚ Expanding on what they think you might be saying
- ✚ Recapping the conversation (particularly if it was a long one)

For further reading and / or support:

1. Visit the **Australian Aphasia Association** (AAA) website: <http://www.aphasia.org.au>
2. The NHMRC **Centre of Clinical Research Excellence in Aphasia** (CCRE in Aphasia Rehabilitation) is dedicated to improving the quality of life for people with aphasia and their families. Website: <http://www.ccreaphasia.org.au>
3. 82 Aphasia Best Practice Statements have been developed (July 2015) to improve the quality and consistency of aphasia rehabilitation. The statements have been incorporated into an online implementation tool, called the **Australian Aphasia Rehabilitation Pathway**.

Click on the following link: <http://www.aphasiapathway.com.au>

4. Visit the **Speech Pathology Australia** website for more information about Speech Pathology services: <http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au>
5. National Stroke Foundation – Australia Website provided information and support options: <http://www.strokefoundation.com.au>

