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)

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 phone
- using numbers and money
- saying your name or the names of your family members
- expressing your immediate needs, ideas or words
- going out into the community

Quite often, family members or carers may find it challenging to understand aphasia and they may find it hard to:

- slow down their speaking
- resist finishing your 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 between you and your conversation partner:

**1. Getting the message IN** is a matter of **others modifying** the way they communicate to help you **understand**.

Some examples include:

- Using **short, simple sentences** and an expressive voice.
- Using **gestures** when communicating to add more visual information
- Writing **keywords** or main ideas down – e.g. large or bold print.
- Using **pictures** and focusing on **one topic at a time**.
- **Eliminating distraction** – noises, people, or multiple visual materials.
- **Observing** your facial expression, eye gaze, body posture or gestures to help them know if you have understood

**2. Getting the message OUT** is a matter of how others help you to **express** your thoughts

Some examples include:

- Asking you **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 understand and to respond.
- Asking **fixed choice questions** – e.g. “Do you want water or coffee?”

**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 examples 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)

*Courtesy of The Aphasia Institute (Toronto, Canada)*

Consult a Speech Pathologist for specialist aphasia support and advice.

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

1. **Australian Aphasia Association** (AAA) website: [www.aphasia.org.au](http://www.aphasia.org.au)
4. **Speech Pathology Australia** website: [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)