Communication After Stroke: Weaving the Tapestry of Your Life
Gloriajean Wallace, Ph.D. CCC-SLP, BC- ANCDS, Mary Purdy, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, BC- ANCDS, and Amy Hasselkus, M.A., CCC-SLP, Members, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)

Introduction

If you have had a stroke or know someone who has, we hope that this article will give you tips for how you can weave together the tapestry of your lives --with the thread of hope, despite the communication challenges that you may face. We hope to help you better understand the ways in which stroke may affect speech and language abilities. We will also share tips to help you better communicate with each other. Finally, we provide you with a list of resources and contact organizations within the “communication-friendly community” so that you will be able to find this information when you need it.

Major Types of Communication Disorders after Stroke

There are three major types of communication impairments that can occur after stroke. These are called aphasia, apraxia, and dysarthria. You may have only one of these problems, or you may have a combination of communication disorders. Every person is different so the following descriptions may or may not fit you well.

Aphasia

Aphasia is a language problem that can cause problems with:
- understanding what others are saying
- finding the right words to say
- putting words into sentences that others can understand
- reading
- writing

Aphasia makes it hard to communicate, but it does not affect thinking skills. A person with aphasia still knows what he or she has always known. The problem is that it is hard to tell others what those thoughts are.

There are many types of aphasia. The most general categories are receptive aphasia and expressive aphasia. We will present a brief overview of these disorders. For further details, you may go to the National Aphasia Association’s website at www.aphasia.org or visit www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/Aphasia.htm.

Receptive Aphasia

A person with receptive aphasia may:
- have problems understanding others, also called an auditory comprehension problem
• not be aware that what they are saying is not correct or doesn’t make sense
• speak fluently, meaning that they do not struggle to get words out as they speak
• have problems understanding what they read

Some people who have receptive aphasia have said that “it felt like I was in a foreign country.” When people say this, they mean that they cannot understand what others are saying to them.

Expressive Aphasia
A person with expressive aphasia may:
• be able to understand most of what others are saying. It may be easier to understand family and friends or when in a quiet place. It may be harder when there are a lot of people talking or it is a noisy place.
• have trouble saying what they are thinking
• be able to only say a few words or very short sentences.
• say words that are jumbled, also called word salad
• say a different word than what he or she wanted to say
• have problems writing words and sentences

Apraxia and Dysarthria
Apraxia and dysarthria are speech problems, not language problems. People with these disorders have problems moving their speech muscles to make sounds and words. Some people have aphasia as well as apraxia or dysarthria. In those cases, the person may have trouble finding the words they want to say and also have trouble actually saying them.

People with apraxia struggle to say the sounds or words they are trying to say. For example, they may try to say “coffee”, but instead say “bobee.” Their speech is labored and slow. Sometimes they may only be able to speak a few words at a time. Their speech muscles work, but the connection between the brain and those muscles does not always work well. Because of this, they may not be able to say the same word in the same way each time they try to say it. It’s as if the messages to the muscles get mixed up and the wrong sounds come out.

With dysarthria, some of the muscles used when talking become weak and don’t move as well as they did before the stroke. The speech of a person with dysarthria may sound slurred. The person may also speak softly and be hard to hear.

General Communication Tips

Each person with aphasia has his or her own preference about how to communicate and get through the “blocks.” It is important to figure out what works best for you and your loved ones. Do you want your friend to supply the words, or do you want to come up with the words yourself? Do you want your wife to correct you, or do you just want to move on? Review the suggestions below and determine which may be helpful for you. Remember – good communication depends upon both of you working together as partners.
**Tips for Talking with People who Have Problems Understanding**

- Turn off TVs and radios and find a quiet spot to talk.
- Speak in a well-lighted space so that you can see each other’s faces and gestures.
- Use short messages and break long directions into smaller steps.
- Add pauses, and slow down your overall rate of speech.
- Repeat what has been said in a slightly different way. The new way may be easier to understand.
- Use gestures, facial expressions, written words, and pictures as cues to help the person understand you.
- Stop every once and a while to check that the person is following the conversation. You can ask yes/no questions or give the person some choices, like “Were we talking about John or Sally?”
- Watch the person with aphasia’s face to see if they seem to be following the conversation.
- Encourage the person to let you know if they are not understanding you.
- Ask the person to let you know what would be helpful for you to do to help them to understand you better.

**Tips for Talking with People who Have Trouble Speaking**

- Be patient! Let the person with aphasia know that you are not in a hurry, and that he is free to take the time that is necessary to get his point across.
- Offer the speaker a pen and paper and encourage him to write a letter or word to start what he is trying to say.
- Write out the alphabet and show it to your loved one. It might help him if he can see or point to the first letter of the word he is trying to say.
- Ask the person with aphasia to use gestures or point to what he wants.
- Don’t assume that he wants you to jump in and say the word for him. That may be frustrating so ask if that is what he wants.

**Tips for Talking In Group Situations**

- Break off into a smaller group so the person with aphasia doesn’t get overwhelmed in large crowds.
- Make sure only one person talks at a time.
- Keep the pace slow.
- Limit background noise.
- “Check in” with the person with aphasia- make sure she is following along.

**If a Person Has a Communication Device**

- Ask the person with aphasia to show you the device- whether it is a “communication notebook” or a high technology electronic communication device.
- Review the device to see the kind of information that is in it, and what it can do.
If the person is having problems getting his point across, ask if there is something in the book (or device) that will help. The person may not initiate use of the book (or device) himself. Be prepared to help get things started.

If the stroke survivor does not have a communication device, consider getting one, with the help of a speech-language pathologist. There are lots of options available, but don’t simply buy one because it looks good. Not every device is right for every person.

The person’s speech-language pathologist, or SLP, will be able to help figure out what strategies and cues will work best for each person.

Maintaining Friendships and a Healthy Social Life

The communication challenges following a stroke are frustrating for everyone. Visits from friends may drop off over time and it may seem as though friends no longer care or are unwilling to reach out and help. But often friends shy away because of a lack of understanding about what has happened, and because they do not know how they can be of help. Some things you may do to help your friends and family include:

- Give your friends the information you read and the web sites you go to and talk about what you have read.
- Be a model - demonstrate the techniques mentioned above. Let them see how they can make communication more successful.
- Don’t wait for your friends to call, call them first. Let them know it is important to maintain their friendship. Having opportunities to communicate will help improve communication.
- Recognize that visits do not have to focus on “talking”. Simple companionship is just as important. Sitting and playing a game of cards, looking through a photo album or magazine, or watching a movie can be a meaningful, satisfying experience for all involved.
- Ask friends to go “out and about”. You can go strolling (or wheeling) through the park, sit on a bench in the town square to “people watch,” or grab coffee at a local diner.

Resources and Contact Organizations

The following organizations have information about aphasia that may be helpful to you.

Academy of Neurologic Communication Sciences and Disorders  www.ancds.org
- Geographic listing of Speech-Language Pathologists with specialty in neurogenics/aphasia in the U.S. and abroad

American Stroke Association  www.strokeassociation.org
- Life after stroke
- How to find stroke/aphasia support groups in your geographic area
- Stroke Connection magazine
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [www.asha.org]
- General information on stroke and communication disorders (aphasia, dysarthria, apraxia)

Aphasia Hope Foundation [www.aphasiahope.org]
- Tips for caregivers

National Aphasia Association [www.aphasia.org]
- Aphasia frequently asked questions
- Communication fact sheets
- Effective tools for families
- Geographical listing of aphasia programs and centers
- Communication dos and don’ts
- The Aphasia Handbook

National Institute for Neurological Disorders and Sciences [www.ninds.nih.gov]
- General information on stroke, aphasia, dysarthria, apraxia

National Stroke Association [www.stroke.org]
- Living After Stroke webinar series
- iHOPE webinar: Aphasia and Stroke
- fact sheets
- Stroke Smart Magazine

- Comprehensive information about stroke, and healthy lifestyles

Closing Thoughts

Think positively, take one step at a time, position yourself in a way that you are able to practice communication in enjoyable social settings as much as possible, and enjoy the journey with the support of your significant others. We thank you for the opportunity to provide information and suggestions that we hope will be helpful as you all move forward to weave together the tapestry of your lives.