

Aphasia – Enhancing Communication

by Diane Johnson, Speech Pathologist

Word finding problems, reading and writing impairments, apraxia, and auditory comprehension difficulties fall under the broad heading of aphasia. Aphasia can be all of these things or only just a few. Individuals can have high level aphasia or severe, low level aphasia. Regardless of how severe or slight the impairment, aphasia is frustrating for the patient and for the caregiver and family. Here are some communication tips that will benefit the patient and the caregiver. They will help stimulate speech and make the most out of an aphasic patient's communication abilities.

1. As a caregiver/family member, begin to participate in the rehab process from the very beginning. Ask the speech pathologist how you can help.
2. Request books and resources on aphasia. Write or visit the Heart Association, and request their excellent materials on stroke. Visit the National Aphasia Association's web site (www.aphasia.org) and others related to aphasia. Subscribe to the *Stroke Connection magazine*.
3. Make a communication book for the patient. To do this you will need to purchase a spiral notebook. Print the names of family members and close friends in bold letters on a single page. Find a copy machine and copy pictures of each person. Paste the pictures on the page next to each name.

While the patient is still in the hospital or rehab facility, make up a new communication book page each day that you visit. Review the previous pages with the patient as well as talking about the new page. Each page should reflect something of significance that is happening at home. Use an I-Zone Polaroid camera to take pictures of things at home. Stick each little picture on the page with a word or two, of explanation. Communication books are great for the patient and excellent for the hospital and rehab staff. After visitors have gone home, the rehab staff can continue to talk to the patient about the things you have put into the book. The extra stimulation is invaluable.

4. When you take the patient home, transfer the communication book pages to a small, pocket-size book—one that allows you to add and subtract pages as the patient progresses and becomes more independent and verbal. As the patient's life broadens, add pages about restaurants, shopping, hairdresser, travel, and outpatient therapy. Assist him or her in using the book when you are out with friends, so that the patient can contribute to the conversation. Make up special "focus pages" with words and pictures about a particular subject before you leave home.
5. Talk to your speech pathologist about getting the patient into a communication group. Don't wait until after therapy is completed! Do it soon.

Communication groups are special. I cannot say enough good things about them. The benefits are numerous. Here are a few of them.

- Patients do not feel alone. They see others who have gone through what they have, who are mastering things that seem impossible.
- A group allows patients to compare their skills and progress with those of others. For example, one patient liked to give a demonstration of how she could tie her shoes one handed. Another person shared his difficulties in getting his car repaired. The group discussed ways in which someone with speech difficulties can get a mechanic's attention. Patients get a chance to share their lives with others who are understanding and will listen. People share experiences and everyone benefits.

The Ann Dahl Gunther Communication Group meets every Thursday at Sharp Rehab in Conference Room 4 from 1:00 to 2:00 pm.. Patients are encouraged to bring with them a *Focus Page* of words and pictures. Participants use these pages to help them share experiences with the group. Some patients simply show their pictures and have others read the words for them. Others, use the pictures to help them remember the events of the previous week. Some examples of topics we have discussed include: taking public transportation, getting a drivers license, getting gas with credit card, using an ATM. Other topics include “where I was born”, “my profession”, “by hobbies”, “what I should have done in that situation”

The Ann Dahl Gunther Communication Group is open to all those with a communication problem. It is not speech therapy. It is about communication—promoting it in whatever way an individual can do it.

(Editors note: There is a fee for the group, please contact Diane Johnson for details.)

Diane Johnson is a speech pathologist at Sharp Hospital and has a private practice in La Mesa. She has had over 30 years of experience working with stroke patients and has recently published *Communication Kit for Stroke Patients*. She is the facilitator for the Ann Dahl Gunther Communication Group. Diane can be reached at 858-494-1866 or certifiedspeech@home.com.