Aphasia: When Your Brain Holds Your Words Hostage

What is Aphasia?

Aphasia is a communication disorder caused by damage to the brain, such as a brain injury or a stroke. At least 30% of people suffer loss of language (aphasia) after a stroke (SAC, n.d.). It can affect speaking, understanding, reading and writing. It does not affect a person's intelligence.

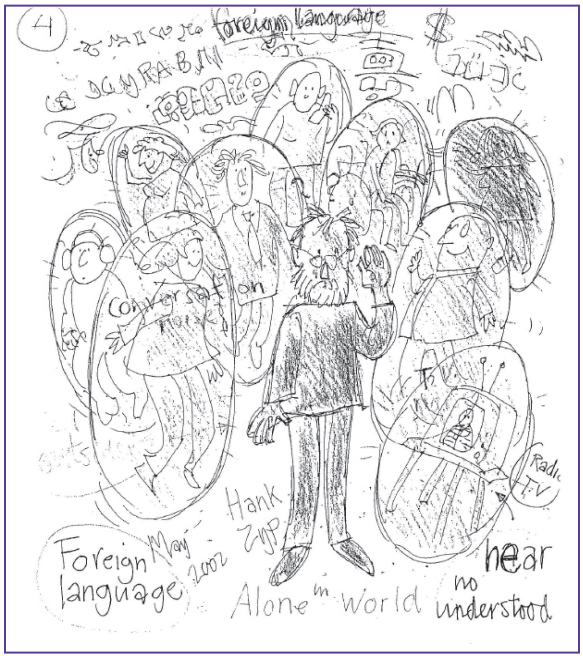
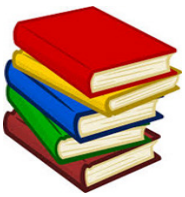


Illustration represents the perspective of a person with aphasia. Artwork submitted by Hank Zyp

Recognizing Aphasia

Aphasia can range from mild to severe. Some people's problems are so subtle that strangers don't even notice them. Other people have severe communication difficulties that prevent them from communicating their basic needs, or understanding what people say. The impact on a person's life also varies.

Some examples are listed below:



Reading Comprehension (severe)

Rose used to read three or four novels a month. Now, she gets frustrated because she can't understand newspaper headlines.

Language Expression (mild)

Bill used to be a public speaker and enjoyed giving presentations as part of his job. Now, he has trouble finding words and needs to write everything down beforehand. He no longer enjoys the presentation aspect of his job and is thinking of switching positions.

Listening Comprehension/Understanding (severe)

Mary used to be a teacher. Now, her husband has to repeat things to her often. He uses short sentences and says the key words many times so she'll understand. If she still has trouble he tries to draw a picture or use gestures to help her understand. Often, she just says, "Oh, never mind."

Writing (moderate)

Often, when Chad tries to write his grocery list, some of the groceries are spelled incorrectly. When he goes to the store, he sometimes can't read his own list.

Alberta College of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists
Hear. Speak. Connect.

#209, 3132 Parsons Road,
Edmonton, AB T6N 1L6
Ph: 780-944-1609 1-800-537-0589

Fax: 780-408-3925
admin@acslpa.ab.ca
www.acslpa.ab.ca

Communicating with Someone Who Has Aphasia:

General Strategies

- **Reduce distractions.** Communicate one-on-one. Eliminate background noise (television, radio).
- **Be a respectful communication partner.** Avoid shouting. Avoid baby talk. Avoid talking about the person in their presence. Don't avoid adult topics.
- **Communicate face to face.** Seeing someone's facial expression and mouth helps the person understand.
- **Acknowledge intelligence.** Recognize that a person with aphasia is as smart as before. Say, "I know you have something to say, but it's hard to get it out." or "I know you know.".

For Expressive Aphasia (Difficulty with Expressing Oneself)

If a person with aphasia has trouble getting words out, here's what you could do:

- **Accept and encourage all communication attempts** (gestures, writing, drawing, and facial expression).
- **Encourage independence.** Watch, listen, and wait for the person with aphasia to get the message out.
- **Check to make sure you understand the message.** Tell what you understand so he or she knows what information to add and ask yes/no questions to clarify. ("Are you saying you would rather walk to the store?").
- **Don't pretend you understand.** Ask the person to use a gesture or write if they're able and ask for clarification. If you don't understand, say so. If you cannot understand the message despite all efforts, let the person know you want to understand and that you will try again later.

Illustration represents the perspective of a person with aphasia. Artwork submitted by Hank Zyp

Receptive Aphasia (Difficulty with Understanding)

If a person with aphasia has trouble understanding, here's what you could do:

- **Supplement verbal communication.** Provide additional supports, such as writing key words, drawing and pointing to objects, pictures or photographs. It is best to use one support strategy at a time.
- **Slow down your speech rate slightly.** Pause between phrases. Speak slowly.
- **Watch and wait.** Watch the person's facial expression and responses to make sure they understand you before you go on or add more information.
- **Repeat information.** Repeat the message using the same words or different ones.
- **Keep the message short and simple.** Speak in short phrases and sentences.

Additional Resources

- Stroke Recovery Association of Edmonton & Aphasia Awareness Committee
- Speech-Language & Audiology Canada
- Aphasia Institute
- Aphasia Hope Foundation
- National Aphasia Association
- American Speech and Hearing Association
- InteRACT

Information Gathered From

- Aphasia Institute
- Intensive Residential Aphasia Communication Therapy (InteRACT)
- National Aphasia Association
- Communication Carryover for Adults, Angela Tipton Dikengil
- Speech Language Pathology and Audiology Canada (SAC). (n.d.) Facts at your fingertips.

April 2014
Revised July 2018

Getting Help

If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist (R.SLP). To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTH LINK - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca
- Find a private practice SLP:
  - Search the Yellow Pages
  - Contact the Alberta Speech-Language Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP) website at www.asapp.ca.